

Critical reproblemization

Foucault and the task of modern philosophy

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It was a matter of analyzing ... the *problemizations* through which being offers itself to be, necessarily thought – and the *practices* on the basis of which these problemizations are formed.

Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*¹

Michel Foucault is well known for having periodically redescribed his previous studies in light of his current project.² A case in point is the two introductions to *The Order of Things*. The 1970 ‘Forward to the English Edition’ frames the book as an analysis of discursive practices;³ yet the original 1966 ‘Preface’ makes no mention of the rules of discourse, but foregrounds the study of ‘the modes of being of things, and of the order that divided them up before presenting them to the understanding.’⁴ In the later introduction, Foucault was redescribing *The Order of Things* in terms of the theory of discourse set forth in his 1969 methodological tract *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. But this does not mean that this redescription is simply a distortion.⁵ For even if this sort of account can readily mislead, it can also open paths for rethinking and amending the prior study so that it might complement and cohere with the new line of inquiry.

If we grant this, then there is an issue of how best to evaluate and make use of such redescriptions. The question is most pressing for those redescriptions from the early 1980s when Foucault offered thoughtful retrospective accounts of his work as a whole. He characterized his projects as forming three interrelated axes of the analysis of human being as a subject of reason and truth.⁶ In 1983 he enriched this redescription by introducing the notion of *problemization*.⁷ Foucault had been wondering whether ‘it would not be possible to consider the very historicity of forms of experience’

by ‘bring[ing] to light the domain where the formation, development, and transformation of forms of experience can situate themselves: that is, [in] a history of thought.’⁸ It appeared to him that ‘there was one element that was capable of describing the history of thought: this was what one could call the element of problems or, more exactly, problemizations.’⁹ Foucault came to view all his work as having been concerned with problemization.

As the crux of Foucault’s final redescription, the notion of problemization can be grasped as a creative reworking of Heidegger’s account of equipmental deficiency. Foucault was explicit in his last interviews that for him Heidegger was ‘an overwhelming influence’,¹⁰ ‘the essential philosopher’ who determined his ‘entire philosophical development’.¹¹ He operated with a more or less Heideggerian construal of the practical constitution of our modes of being. According to Foucault, subjectivity emerges only in the event of a problemization when thought comes to reflect upon and offer responses to tensions, difficulties and problems in a gathering of practices. Foucault seems to suggest that we cannot even *think* about our ways of existence until they have become problematized, much as Heidegger posits that *Dasein* becomes conscious of objects only in the advent of an equipmental breakdown. Philosophy for Foucault is a special engagement with problemizations: what he styled a *critical history of thought* oriented toward disclosing (and transgressing) the contingent limits of our modes of being. This article offers an account of Foucault’s conception of problemization; it concludes with a brief exercise in the redescription of the *sexualité* series as a critical reproblemization of the modern experience of sex.

The practical foundation of subjectivities

Like many contemporary philosophers, Foucault rejected the Cartesian view of human being as an invariant subject that grounds the order of things: 'I do indeed believe that there is no sovereign, founding subject, a universal subject to be found everywhere. I am very sceptical of this view of the subject and very hostile to it.'¹² Nevertheless, the subject of modern thought was at the heart of Foucault's enterprise. In the 1982 essay 'The Subject and Power', he explained that 'the goal of my work during the last twenty years ... has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects. My work has dealt with three modes of objectification which transform human beings into subjects.'¹³ In contradistinction to deconstruction, Foucault explored the *historicity* of subjectivity. Because this endeavour was avowedly involved with the history of reason and truth,¹⁴ the subject of Foucauldian history is a subject of *knowledge*.¹⁵

Now, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is also a history of the knowing subject. But Foucault was explicitly opposed to any universal history of reason.¹⁶ For Foucault, there is no metasubject of history that can encompass a progressive or regressive development of universal truth. The subject is not the ground, source or terminus of reason, but is itself founded upon contingent social practices. Rather than positing a singular Subject of History, Foucault investigated the historical practices that have been the condition for the emergence of diverse forms of subjectivity and rationality. In this regard, Foucault was an expressed pluralist.¹⁷

To be sure, Foucault's early studies on *The History of Madness* (1961) and *The Order of Things* (1966) retained vestiges of an epochal subject.¹⁸ But in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) he unequivocally asserted the dispersion of subjectivities, theorizing discourse neither as a system of signs nor as a logic of propositions, but as founded upon practices regulated by contingent rules.¹⁹ The basic unit of any discourse is the statement; a statement posits not only discursive objects but also an enunciating subject:

The subject of the statement should not be regarded as identical with the author of the formulation – either in substance, or in function. He is not in fact the cause, origin, or starting-point of the phenomenon of the written or spoken articulation.... If a proposition, a sentence, a group of signs can be called 'statement', it is not therefore because, one day, someone happened to speak them or put them into some concrete form of writing, it is because the

position of the subject can be assigned. To describe a formulation *qua* statement does not consist in analyzing the relations between the author and what he says (or wanted to say, or said without wanting to); but in determining what position can and must be occupied by any individual if he is to be the subject of it.²⁰

In this formulation there is a reversal in the traditional status of the knowing or intending subject. The subject is not the foundation of rationality and knowledge, but is dispersed as a variable position in discourse. What must be stressed is that Foucault here is bracketing all nondiscursive activities, all 'lived experience', to see to what extent he can isolate discourse as a topic of inquiry.²¹ 'The analysis of statements operates therefore without reference to a cogito. It does not pose the question of the speaking subject ... [but instead] is situated at the level of the "it is said":'²² Even as words like 'systems', 'rules' and 'formations' absorb and dissipate human agency, the terms of 'practice' stand as a placeholder for the bracketed activities of the historical individuals who engage in discourse.

By the early 1980s, the quasi-structuralist orientation of the archaeology of knowledge had given way to the broader investigation of experience and its conditions:

The discourses of mental illness, delinquency, or sexuality say what the subject is only within a very particular truth game; but these games do not impose themselves on the subject from the outside in accord with necessary causal or structural determinations. Instead they open up a field of experience in which subject and object alike are constituted only under certain conditions, but in which they go on changing in relation to one another, and thus go on modifying this field of experience itself.²³

More emphatically than with the archaeology of knowledge, practices are now said to 'provide the key to understanding a correlative constitution of the subject and object'.²⁴ The rationality of a given truth-game, the reason inherent in the correlative constitution of subject and object, rests 'upon a foundation of human practices and human faces'. Human practices in their non-anonymity and specificity are what found and constitute the fields of experience proper to the transformation of human being into a subject of knowledge.²⁵

Foucault's axiom of the practical formation of subjectivities has affinities with Heidegger's existential analytic of *Dasein*. Like Foucault, Heidegger did not accept phenomenology's foundationalist conception of the knowing subject. In *Being and Time*, he propounded

a radical critique of Husserlian intentionality.²⁶ Prior to and deeper than the directedness of theoretical consciousness towards its objects is *Dasein's* being-in-the-world. *Dasein* is not primordially a mind removed from an external reality but exists amidst people and things *in* the world. Existence is first and foremost nonconscious. One does not usually or primarily form a theory upon which one then acts, but rather is always already engaged in a delimited but creative understanding (*Verstehen*), a 'knowing-how' to deal with the situation at hand (and this includes language practices). The destined ways of existence, the everyday practices of a people, reflexively define *Dasein's* selfhood;²⁷ the 'essence' of *Dasein* is constituted and reconstituted in the course of existence.²⁸ *Dasein* is not a selfsame substance, not a 'subject', but embodies practices that found modalities of selfhood, including the self as a knowing subject.

Similarly for Foucault, the 'know-how and competence'²⁹ embodied in practices can open up fields of experience where human being is constituted as a subject. This subject is not a substance but a mutable form that is 'not above all or always identical to itself'.³⁰ Human being is neither fixed to nor exhausted by any particular form of subjectivity. Moreover, subjectivity is not the only modality of self, but the form proper to knowledge.³¹ Those instances when human being is transformed into a subject of knowledge are what Foucault termed 'problemizations'.

Problemization

For Heidegger, practices are nonconscious; only under certain conditions does *Dasein* enter into a knowing engagement with and explicit thematization of its ways of existence. Likewise for Foucault, our forms of life enter into genuine reflection only in the case of a problemization:

for a domain of action, a behavior, to enter the field of thought, it is necessary for a certain number of factors to have made it uncertain, to have made it lose its familiarity, or to have provoked a certain number of difficulties around it. These elements result from social, economic, or political processes. But here their role is that of instigation. They can exist and perform their action for a very long time, before there is effective problemization by thought.³²

Another way to put this is that the general coherence of a gathering of practices comes under pressure from tensions and difficulties within and amongst those practices. This amounts to the possibility, or actuality, of the fraying of existing forms of life.

Such circumstances occasion, but do not determine, a problemization:

Problemization 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 or non-discursive practices that introduce something into the play of true and false and constitutes it as an object for thought (whether in the form of moral reflection, scientific knowledge, political analysis, etc.).³³

Problemization is neither the realist's representation of external things nor the semiotic idealist's creation of objects. Foucault is cautioning us to distance the notion of problemization from the assumptions of modern epistemology. He is propounding a novel philosophical account of the sociality of knowledge.

Problemization is the subjectification and objectification of our practical affairs in games of truth that constitute specific fields of knowledge. These knowledge-domains enable and condition *responses* oriented towards coping with the designated problem.

To one single set of difficulties, several responses can be proposed. And most of the time different responses actually are proposed.... It is problemization that responds to these difficulties, but by doing something quite other than expressing them or manifesting them: in connection with them it develops the conditions in which possible responses can be given; it defines the elements that will constitute what the different solutions attempt to respond to.³⁴

A problemization is in the end an 'answer' to the difficulty it has itself defined.³⁵

There are three moments of a problemization, each an instance of practice: (1) the practical tension itself, which may entail (but need not be restricted to) class struggle and social conflict; (2) the stepping back from, reflecting upon, and thematizing this difficulty in games of truth; and (3) responses that institute corrective or compensatory procedures.³⁶ All three moments of a problemization intertwine as sites in the social fabric, weaving specific fields of what Foucault termed *experience* – the experience of madness, the experience of sexuality, the experience of health, and so on.³⁷

We can get clearer about the Foucauldian notion of problemization by comparing it to the Heideggerian conception of equipmental deficiency. *Dasein* is always already absorbed in its everyday dealings. A 'breakdown' in the relative ease or smoothness of this ongoing coping is the precondition for becoming conscious of the world as a realm of objects. Heidegger posits three modalities of breakdown that

curtail *Dasein's* compartments.³⁸ The first is conspicuousness (*Auffallen*) when an item of equipment in a holistic contexture becomes unusable (the hammer is broken). The second is obtrusiveness (*Aufdringlichkeit*) when an item of equipment is lacking (the hammer is missing). The third is obstinacy (*Aufsässigkeit*) when something obstructs the task at hand (the small confines of the closet prevent one from using the hammer). Each modality of breakdown disrupts our everyday dealings and modifies our relation with the equipmental contexture. One may 'stand back' from the world, thematize the deficiency, and perhaps develop a view of its objective reality. But even when forming an instrumental theory, this is only within and against the background of ongoing existence. The knowing subject is only a modification of *Dasein's* being-in-the-world.

Like the Heideggerian conception of deficiency, the Foucauldian notion of problemization accounts for the emergence of knowledge and subjectivity. But whereas Heidegger locates temporary breakdowns in the use of equipment, Foucault analyses how an array of practices complicate their own smooth operation. Heidegger points out deficiencies in the immediate environment; Foucault focuses upon tensions in the general coherence of a gathering of practices. Foucault's approach allows for the examination of the emergence of knowledge-domains that extend well beyond the temporary consciousness of a missing or broken tool. It entails rethinking what it means to think.

Thought

Problemization is how our modes of being offer themselves to be thought. Without problemizations, Foucault seems to suggest, we cannot even *think* about the practices that constitute who we are. Thought (*pensée*) is the movement of stepping back from and reflecting upon our ways of existence.

In an interview conducted in May 1984, only weeks before his death, Foucault laid out his view of thought and its relation to problemization:

For a long time I have been trying to see if it would be possible to describe the history of thought as distinct both from the history of ideas – by which I mean the analysis of systems of representations – and from the history of mentalities – by which I mean an analysis of attitudes and types of action. It seemed to me there was one element that was capable of describing the history of thought: this was what one could call the element of problems or, more exactly, problemizations. What distinguishes thought is that it is something quite different from the set of representations that underlies a certain behavior. Thought is not what inhabits

a certain conduct and gives it meaning; rather, it is what allows one to step back from this way of acting and reacting, to present it to oneself as an object of thought and question it as to its meaning, its conditions, and its goals. Thought is freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem.³⁹

Thought is not a representation or system of representations, not 'what inhabits a certain conduct and gives it meaning', as in modern cognitivist accounts.⁴⁰ Rather, it is what receives and gives shape to the problemizations arising from certain ways of existence. It is distinct from ideas, mentalities and brute behaviours, an activity of detachment from and reflection upon our practices to the extent that they have become 'problematic'.⁴¹

Moreover, thought is an activity of freedom that maintains a relative autonomy from the dictates of social relations and forces.⁴² It is not that we are mechanical and unfree in our practical affairs – Foucault speaks of the 'know-how' and 'open strategies' embodied in our interactions – but that however creative our actions may be, they are regularly constrained within a delimited range of norms. By problematizing what we do, thought conditions responses to our current practices and thereby opens up new possibilities of conduct.

Foucault's position at the Collège de France was titled 'Chair in the History of Systems of Thought.' Like the later Heidegger, he was concerned with the character of thinking.⁴³ Both refused to equate representation with the essence of thought. Heidegger viewed representation (*Vorstellung*) as the formation of ideas that 'picture' the world as an objective realm for human control and domination; he saw representation as the hegemonic mode of thought in modernity.⁴⁴ Seeking ways of thinking otherwise, Heidegger reminded us that, unlike modern scientific theory which sets forth the real as an object-domain of calculable order, ancient Greek *theoria* was more directly a way of life (*bios theōrētikos*) devoted to looking 'upon the pure shining-forth of that which presences'.⁴⁵ He advocated that we moderns 'practise' at freeing ourselves from the horizontal-transcendental disclosures of representation via a path of the non-willful thinking of releasement (*Galessenheit*).⁴⁶

In formulating the notion of problemization, Foucault also came to distinguish thought from a representation or a system of representations.⁴⁷ Although the subject-object relation is most commonly taken to be proper to representation (as for Heidegger), Foucault



maintained that domains of knowledge have variable forms of subject and object that are to be differentiated from the representation of ideas. He viewed thought as an extraordinary activity of freedom, semi-autonomous in relation to historical circumstances, and never confined by the existing games of truth which it has itself invented.⁴⁸

Gilles Deleuze once remarked that it is ‘definitely Foucault, along with Heidegger but in a quite different way, who’s most profoundly transformed the image of thought.’⁴⁹ As the above remarks suggest, however, Foucault was closer to and more engaged with Heidegger’s image of thought than Deleuze acknowledged.⁵⁰ The notion of problemization can even be taken as a response to a lacuna in the later Heidegger’s conception of thinking. In *Being and Time*, consciousness is seen as a temporary manifestation against the background of nonconscious practices. In the later works, however, there is little talk about existence and much about thinking. Although in the “Letter on Humanism” Heidegger indicates that he had not abandoned the insights gleaned from the analytic of *Dasein*, it remains cloudy in the later writings how modalities of thinking, such as modern representation, are occasioned by and relate to broader historical practices. Contrariwise, Foucault advanced that even if thinking was not a representation, thought accompanies our comportments.⁵¹ Practices constitute our modes of being, subjectivities are occasioned by problemiza-

tions, and thought abounds in our everyday lives. What is the upshot of this constellation of claims?

By suggesting that thought accompanies our comportments, Foucault was *not* reverting to some pre-Heideggerian species of cognitivism. Rather, he seems to have meant that problemizations are common, ubiquitous and ongoing in engendering patterns and systems of the subjectification and objectification of human being.⁵² Moreover, with the notion of problemization, Foucault was able to recast the dialectical conception of societal contradiction. In the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, he had already entertained the possibility that contradictions were the precondition for discourse:

Such a [fundamental] contradiction, far from being an appearance or accident of discourse, far from being that from which it must be freed if its truth is at last to be revealed, constitutes the very law of its existence: it is on the basis of such a contradiction that discourse emerges, and it is in order both to translate it and to overcome it that discourse begins to speak ... it is because contradiction is always anterior to discourse, and because it can never therefore entirely escape it, that discourse changes, undergoes transformation, and escapes of itself from its own continuity. Contradiction, then, functions throughout discourse, as the principle of its historicity.⁵³

In this proposal for the archaeology of knowledge, contradictions are the impetus for and motor of dis-

cursive formation and change. Likewise for the later theory of problemization, knowledge-domains emerge on the basis of and establish responses to ‘contradictions’ (i.e., problems) in a gathering of practices. Only whereas in a schematic dialectical account there is a singular contradiction for each stage of history, in the Foucauldian construal there is always a dispersion of tensions and difficulties throughout the social fabric. And where for vulgar Hegelian Marxisms there is an eventual resolution of the contradiction, dialectically leading to a higher stage of history with its own fundamental contradiction, for Foucault there are multiple responses to a given difficulty, none of which need overcome the problem.

The Foucauldian notion of problemization would thus seem to posit: (1) webs of first-order practice; and (2) a dimension of thought that reflects upon and responds to tensions in these practices.⁵⁴ Thought is not exclusively exterior to the first-order compartments, but on the contrary is woven into them as games of truth and procedures of correction in constituting the forms of experience. Unlike the sublation of a contradiction a problemization does not so much resolve as modify a given problem.⁵⁵ This alters the array of first-order practices, establishing new conditions for further problemization by thought. Modification leads to modification; thinking assumes patterns and shapes over time. Whence Foucault’s efforts to write a *history of thought*.⁵⁶

But even if thought tends to become habitual, it remains an activity of freedom. Thought cannot only respond anew but also can reflect upon itself and trace its own habits by disclosing the ‘conditions under which certain relations between subject and object are formed or modified.’⁵⁷ Thought can be *critical* of itself. And this criticality, which further lifts us from immersion in our everyday affairs, is exemplified in modernity by the discursive practice of philosophy.

Modern philosophy

In a 1978 interview with Duccio Trombadori, Foucault was emphatic that ‘I don’t consider myself a philosopher. What I do is neither a way of doing philosophy nor a way of suggesting to others not to do it.’⁵⁸ By the early 1980s, however, having reformulated his project as concerned with problemizations, Foucault pronounced that he was working in a philosophical tradition that included Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Nietzsche, Weber, Husserl, Heidegger, Horkheimer and Haber-

mas.⁵⁹ This was the strain of modern philosophy that was not an analytics of truth, but what Foucault styled a critical ontology of ourselves.⁶⁰

As a critical mode of thought, modern philosophy discloses the practical conditions of knowledge and subjectivity. And in clarifying who we are, this style of thinking adopts a special relation to the present:

If one sees philosophy as a form of discursive practice that has its own history, it seems to me that with this text on the *Aufklärung* [Kant’s ‘What is Enlightenment?’] we see philosophy ... problematizing its own discursive contemporaneity.... And in doing so we see that when the philosopher asks how he belongs to this present it is a quite different question from that of how one belongs to a particular doctrine or tradition; its is no longer simply the question from that of how one belongs to a human community in general, but rather of how one belongs to a certain ‘us’, to an us that concerns a cultural totality of one’s own time. It is this ‘us’ that is becoming for the philosopher the object of his own reflection. By the same token, the philosopher can no longer avoid the question of the specific way in which he belongs to this ‘us’. All this – philosophy as the problemization of a present, and as the questioning by the philosopher of this present to which he belongs and in relation to which he has to situate himself – might well be said to characterize philosophy as the discourse of modernity on modernity.⁶¹

Modern philosophy problematizes the present to which it belongs. This is not the first time Western philosophy has concerned itself with its own present; only now this concern seeks a ‘way out’ (*Ausgang*) so to inaugurate new ways of being and thinking.⁶² Philosophy is the discursive practice of *critical reprob-lemization*.⁶³ It rethinks contemporary problemizations that ‘are as *concrete* and *general* as possible, problems that approach politics from behind and cut across societies on the diagonal’.⁶⁴ In embracing the ‘us’ of a cultural totality, philosophy explicates those conditions of experience that are historical and general rather than constant and universal.⁶⁵ As a radical exercise in thinking, philosophy is ‘the discourse of modernity on modernity’.

Foucault conducted philosophy as a mode of historical inquiry.⁶⁶ His strategy was to ‘eventalize’ the present.⁶⁷ He invented archaeology, genealogy and the study of ethics as modes of critical history that map the events the have led up to and constitute present-day problemizations. In clarifying the conditions and stakes of an existing problemization, Foucault’s philosophical practice offered a ‘history of the present’; we

come to see how a present-day problemization is not definitive of some universal scheme of truth, but is itself a singular event that could be otherwise:

The work of the intellect is to show that what is, does not have to be, what it is.... Therefore the return to history makes sense in the respect that history shows that which is was not always so. It unites casual movements into threads of a fragile and uncertain history. Thus things were formed which give the impression of the greatest self-evidence. What reason considers its necessity or much more what various forms of rationality claim to be their necessity, has a history which we can determine completely and recover from the tapestry of contingency. But this doesn't mean that these forms of rationality are irrational. They rest upon a foundation of human practices and human faces, because they are made they can be unmade – of course, assuming we know how they were made.⁶⁸

It is crucial to know 'how they [the forms of rationality] were made.' For reform movements always arise. But

if at the base there has not been the work of thought upon itself and if, in fact, modes of thought, that is to say, modes of action [which thought always accompanies if not directs], have not been altered, whatever the project for reform, we know that it will be swamped, digested by modes of behavior and institutions that will always be the same.⁶⁹

The way out from the jurisdiction of an existing problemization requires more than reform – it calls for a history of the present to perform the critical task of reproblemating experience.

Let us now bring together some of the threads of Foucault's final redescription. Problemization is what first brings our ways of being into thought by dealing with practices that constitute 'contradictory' (hence relatively unstable) sites in the social fabric. Thought invents games of truth and conditions procedures of correction that together with the first-order practices establish the forms of experience. Even though a given problemization and its effects are thoroughly historical and singular, we are habituated to think about our reigning modes of being and forms of experience as universal. Philosophy is parasitic on this state of affairs.⁷⁰ By offering a critical history of the present, philosophy strives to: (1) debunk the universalizing pretensions inhering in our forms of experience; (2) dehabituate how we think about who we are; and (3) disclose a contradictory weave in the social fabric from which we may find a way out from the binding imperatives of modernity.⁷¹

A way out from the experience of sexuality

Foucault recounted that the 'notion common to all the work I have done since *Histoire de la folie* is that of problemization, though it must be said that I never isolated this notion sufficiently. But one always finds what is essential after the event; the most general things are what appear last.'⁷² Given the incisiveness of the notion or problemization, it is instructive to see how some of Foucault's mature projects can be understood in this light.

According to the account in Volume I of *The History of Sexuality*, Freud's problemization of the difficulties of human sexual relations was decisive for modern European culture. Freud theorized sexual repression as a principal cause of neurosis and responded by inventing the talking cure of therapy as a method for restoring mental health. Psychoanalysis is a game of truth that transforms human being into a subject of sexuality, while psychotherapy is the corrective practice that implements this knowledge in curing neurotic illness. Foucault implies that we have inherited much of this experience of sex.

Although Foucault questions the soundness of the hypothesis of repression, he does not simply disagree with Freud. Instead, he seeks to clarify the historical conditions that led up to and inform the psychoanalytic problemization. Countering the view that the Oedipal conflict is a transhistorical constant of all civilized peoples, Foucault argues that neurosis is peculiar to the modern institution of the conjugal family. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, marriages based on alliances gave way to those based on ideals of domestic love. Yet the conjugal family, whatever its merits as a site of earthly happiness, was founded as an institution of biopower. Biopower enhances life so to maximize human productive and reproductive energies. Its procedures include disciplining docile bodies, policing the state, maintaining standards of health, and increasing the size of the population.

The conjugal family was the node of maximization of the population. This required a 'deployment of sexuality'. Descending from sixteenth-century confessional reforms, discursive practices of speaking the truth of one's desires – of ever more precisely articulating one's libidinal impulses and fantasies – proliferated in the eighteenth century, becoming proper to the life of the conjugal family. Under the imperative of exorcizing the individual from desire, the incessant speaking the truth of sex *produced* desire. Within the cramped confines of the nuclear family this deployment of sexuality

bred incestuous attachments that, given traditional proscriptions, could not be acted upon:

It [incest] is manifested as a thing that is strictly forbidden in the family insofar as the latter functions as a deployment of alliance; but it also is a thing that is continuously demanded in order for the family to be a hotbed of constant sexual incitement.⁷³

Between the taboos inherited from practices of alliance and the new intensity of sexual energies there developed tensions in family life. Inadmissible desires threatened the happiness and functionality of the conjugal family. Freudian psychoanalysis problematized these tensions as neuroses that required psychotherapeutic treatment.

Now, Foucault does not say that people might not be repressed; what he stresses is that the psychotherapeutic response is normalizing. However much the talking cure might help one overcome or redirect repressed desires toward more acceptable partners, it was yet another discursive practice of speaking the truth of sex (albeit geared toward liberating rather than negating desire). In the process of redressing the problem of incestuous attachments, psychoanalysis mobilized and intensified libidinal energies. In the end the Freudian problemization was itself a deployment of sexuality that aligned with the normalizing forces of biopower.

In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault can be said to have developed a critical reproblemization of the modern experience of sex. But even if he locates sites in the social fabric from which we might find a way out from the dictates of biopower, he offers no counter-response. It was only in the subsequent studies on ethics that Foucault explored ways to transgress the modern experience of sex.

In the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality* as well as in numerous late interviews and essays, Foucault turned his attention to practices of self-transformation, what he termed *ethics*. How does an individual work on herself to transmute desire? By what techniques has the individual constituted herself as an ethical subject who, in knowing the truth, transforms herself into a certain kind of moral agent? Going back to the ancient Greeks, Foucault began mapping a history of Western ethical practices.⁷⁴ In the midst of publishing these studies, however, he did something he had not done before: Foucault began recommending that we appropriate and experiment with some of the historical practices he was investigating, most notably what he took to be the ancient Greek aesthetics of existence.⁷⁵ Foucault was not proposing

a return to a nostalgic past, which he deemed impossible, but instead a *repetition*, a folding of historical practices into our present ones, producing newly modernized modes of 'aestheticized' life. Rather than turning to psychoanalysis and its offshoots in self-help manuals, Foucault advocated that we experiment with pre-modern practices so to *denormalize* our current modes of being.⁷⁶ Whereas the first volume clarifies the conditions and stakes of the modern experience of sex, opening a way out from the dictates of biopower, the ethical studies mine resources for denormalizing our interpersonal relationships.

Notes

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1. Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality Volume Two*, trans. Robert Hurley, Pantheon, New York, 1985, p. 11.
2. For discussion, see Thomas R. Flynn, 'Truth and Subjectivation in the Later Foucault', *Journal of Philosophy* 82, 1985, p. 352; and Thomas McCarthy, 'The Critique of Impure Reason', in *Ideals and Illusions: On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, 1991, p. 221 n. 29.
3. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Vintage Books, New York, 1970, p. xiv.
4. *Ibid.*, p. xxii.
5. There are significant differences between the historical ontology of language as presented in *The Order of Things* and the character of discourse as presented in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. For discussion, see Gary Gutting, 'Introduction. Michel Foucault: User's Manual', in Gary Gutting, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994, pp. 16–18.
6. See Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, p. 4; Michel Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?', in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, Pantheon, New York, 1984, pp. 48–9; and Michel Foucault, 'On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress', in *ibid.*, pp. 351–352. See also Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd edn, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1983, p. 208; Michel Foucault, 'Truth, Power, Self: An Interview with Michel Foucault October 25, 1982', in *Technologies of Self: Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1988, p. 15; Michel Foucault, 'The Return of Morality', in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interview and Other Writings*,

- 1977–1984, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, Routledge, New York and London, 1988, p. 243; and Maurice Florence [Michel Foucault], ‘Foucault, Michel, 1926–’, in *Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, pp. 315–16.
7. The ‘Index’, in Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits, 1954–1988*, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald, Éditions Gallimard, Paris, 1994, vol. 4, p. 875, lists only two instances of this term prior to 1983, both of which have a markedly different use and sense to subsequent usage.

For a different assessment of Foucault’s late notion of problemization than the one I shall be advancing, cf. Robert Castel, “‘Problemization’ as a Mode of Reading History”, in Jan Goldstein, ed., *Foucault and the Writing of History*, Blackwell, Oxford and Cambridge MA, 1994, pp. 237–52. As will become clear, I do not see ‘problemization’ as at bottom a method for doing history. Rather, a problemization is itself the condition of possibility of engaging in a special kind of philosophical history – what Foucault termed ‘a critical history of thought’. For a comparable view, see Charles E. Scott, *On the Advantages and Disadvantages of Ethics and Politics*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1996, pp. 115–16 and *passim*.
 8. Michel Foucault, ‘Preface to *The History of Sexuality*, Volume II’, in *The Foucault Reader*, p. 334.
 9. Michel Foucault, ‘Polemics, Politics, and Problemizations: An Interview’, in *ibid.*, p. 388.
 10. Foucault, ‘Truth, Power, Self’, pp. 12–13.
 11. Foucault, ‘The Return of Morality’, p. 250.
 12. Michel Foucault, ‘An Aesthetics of Existence’, in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, p. 50.
 13. Foucault, ‘The Subject and Power’, p. 208. See also Foucault, ‘What is Enlightenment?’, p. 49.
 14. Michel Foucault, ‘How Much Does It Cost for Reason to Tell the Truth’, in *Foucault Live (Interviews, 1966–1984)*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, Semiotext[e], New York, 1989, p. 238; and Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, pp. 6ff.
 15. The sense of the word ‘subject’ has shifting inflections in Foucault’s writings. Nevertheless, it is my contention that in the final redescriptions centred on problemization the term ‘subject’ most often signifies an individual’s relation to (or readiness for) some form of knowledge – from institutions of specialized domains of science to solitary acts of self-recognition that incite one to self-transformation. For an explicit and clear explanation that the subject of a problemization is a subject of knowledge, see Foucault, ‘Foucault, Michel, 1926–’. See also Michel Foucault, ‘The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom’, in *The Final Foucault*, ed. James Bernauer and David Rasmussen, MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, 1988, p. 1. So construed, the subject of a problemization is a more or less conscious (and self-conscious) agent, its actions more or less intentional (see Foucault, ‘Foucault, Michel, 1926–’, p. 318, and Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, p. 10). I shall argue, however, this does not mean for Foucault that a particular mental state is the ‘cause’ of our actions, nor that our *practices* (in the existential-ontological sense of the term) are a function of consciousness.
 16. On the importance of escaping Hegel, see Foucault’s 1970 lecture ‘The Discourse on Language’, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, Pantheon, New York, 1972, pp. 235–7. See also Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*, trans. R. James Goldstein and James Cascaito, Semiotext[e], New York, 1991, pp. 44–6.
 17. Foucault, ‘How Much Does It Cost’, p. 251.
 18. Foucault acknowledged this for *The History of Madness* in the ‘Introduction’ to *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p. 16.
 19. *Ibid.*, pp. 46–8.
 20. *Ibid.*, pp. 95–6.
 21. For a stimulating and important discussion of the difficulties with this bracketing of nondiscursive practices, see Dreyfus and Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, pp. 79–100. See further Gary Gutting’s remarks that Foucault is not so much dealing with serious speech-acts as analysing discourse from the outside (*Michel Foucault’s Archaeology of Scientific Reason*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, p. 241).
 22. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p. 122.
 23. Foucault, ‘Foucault, Michel, 1926–’, pp. 317–18.
 24. *Ibid.*, p. 318.
 25. Foucault, ‘How Much Does It Cost’, p. 252. See also Foucault, ‘The Ethic of Care’, p. 10; Foucault, ‘Preface to *The History of Sexuality*, Volume II’, p. 335; Foucault, ‘An Aesthetics of Existence’, pp. 50–51; and Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, p. 5.

On the status of practices in Foucault, see Dreyfus and Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*; Flynn, ‘Truth and Subjectivation’, p. 539; and Thomas Flynn, ‘Foucault and Historical Nominalism’, in *Phenomenology and Beyond: The Self and its Language*, ed. Harold A. Durfee and David F.T. Rodier, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, 1989, pp. 135, 144, n. 9. Flynn correctly notes that ‘Foucault’s concept of practice seems close to that of his colleague at the Collège de France, Pierre Bourdieu’; I suspect that this is due to both Bourdieu and Foucault having looked to Heidegger’s non-intellectualistic account of human activity (cf. Dreyfus and Rabinow, pp. 122–5).
 26. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Harper & Row, New York, 1962, Division I. See also *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1988, pp. 21, 58 ff., and 154 ff.
 27. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 85, 149–68; *Basic Problems*, pp. 158–61.
 28. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 152. See also Martin Heidegger, ‘Letter on Humanism’, in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell, Harper & Row, New York, 1977, pp. 206–10.
 29. Foucault, ‘The Subject and Power’, p. 223.
 30. Foucault, ‘The Ethic of Care’, p. 10.
 31. ‘I will call subjectivization the procedure by which one obtains the constitution of a subject, or more precisely, of a subjectivity, which is of course only one of the given possibilities of a self-consciousness’ (Foucault, ‘The Return of Morality’, p. 252).
 32. Foucault, ‘Polemics, Politics, and Problemizations’, p. 388. See also Foucault, ‘Foucault, Michel, 1926–’, p. 315, and Michel Foucault, ‘The Concern for Truth’, in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, p. 256. For an earlier, more Nietzschean conception of knowledge as the product of human confrontation and battle, see Michel Foucault, ‘La vérité et les formes juridiques’, in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 2, p. 252 (this text dates from 1974).
 33. Foucault, ‘The Concern for Truth’, p. 257. On Foucault’s

- practical holism, see Hubert L. Dreyfus, 'Holism and Hermeneutics', *Review of Metaphysics* 34, 1980, pp. 3–23.
34. Foucault, 'Polemics, Politics, and Problemizations', p. 389.
 35. Michel Foucault, *Discourse and Truth: The Problemization of Parrhesia*, comp. Joseph Pearson, notes to a seminar given by Foucault at the University of California at Berkeley, 1983, pp. 115–16.
 36. Cf. the earlier formulation in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* of a 'system of *real* or *primary* relations, a system of *reflexive* or *secondary* relations, and a system of relations that might properly be called *discursive*' (p. 45).
 37. Michel Foucault, 'Sexual Choice, Sexual Act', in *Foucault Live*, p. 212; Foucault, 'Preface to *The History of Sexuality*, Volume II', pp. 333–7; Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, pp. 4 ff.; Foucault, 'Foucault, Michel, 1926–', pp. 315–18; and Foucault, 'The Return of Morality', p. 253. Cf. Foucault, *Discourse and Truth*, p. 48.
 38. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 102–6. For discussion, see Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's 'Being and Time', Division I*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, 1991, pp. 70 ff.
 39. Foucault, 'Polemics, Politics, and Problemizations', p. 388. See also Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, pp. 10–11; Foucault, 'The Concern for Truth', p. 256; and Foucault, *Discourse and Truth*, pp. 47–8.
 40. Foucault, "Preface to *The History of Sexuality*, Volume II", p. 335. David Ingram remarks that this passage 'seems incompatible with the strong, practical holism Dreyfus attributed to Foucault'; 'Foucault and Habermas on the Subject of Reason', in *Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, p. 256 n. 30. However, between this earlier draft of a 'Preface' to *The Use of Pleasure* and the much changed 'Introduction' included in the book, Foucault formulated the notion of problemization, which clarified his views of thought and action in ways that validate Dreyfus's ascription of practical holism. See now above, note 33.
 41. 'Problematic' is a term that appears in the writings of Gaston Bachelard, especially in his work in the philosophy of science (e.g. *Le Rationalism appliqué*, 1949). For critical discussion, see Dominique Lecourt, *Marxism and Epistemology: Bachelard, Canguilhem and Foucault*, trans. Ben Brewster, New Left Books, London, 1975, pp. 79–81. One of the fundamental differences between the Bachelardian notion of the problematic and the Foucauldian notion of problemization is that a problematic is internal to a particular epistemological field (thereby accounting for the specific 'doubts' that govern a given line of scientific inquiry) whereas a problemization is occasioned by a tension in a gathering of social practices that precedes and conditions but does not determine thought's invention of a truth game proper to and definitive of the problem.
 42. Foucault, 'Truth, Power, Self', p. 10; Michel Foucault, 'Practicing Criticism', in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, pp. 154–5; and Michel Foucault, 'Is It Really Important to Think? An Interview', *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 9, 1982, p. 33.
 43. In a round-table discussion on the novel conducted in 1963, Foucault expressed his fascination with that '[non-psychological] niveau d'une expérience très difficile à formuler – celle de la pensée', posing the questions: 'qu'est-ce que c'est que penser, qu'est-ce que c'est que cette expérience extraordinaire de la pensée?' (Michel Foucault, 'Débat sur le roman', in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 1, p. 139).
 44. Martin Heidegger, 'The Age of the World Picture', in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt, Harper & Row, New York, 1977, pp. 115–54; Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche. Volume IV: Nihilism*, trans. Frank A. Capuzzi, Harper & Row, New York, 1982, pp. 102 ff.; and Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. Fred D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray, Harper & Row, New York, 1968.
 45. Martin Heidegger, 'Science and Reflection', in *The Question Concerning Technology*, p. 164.
 46. Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hand Freund, Harper & Row, New York, 1966.
 47. Foucault, 'Polemics, Politics, and Problemizations', p. 388; Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, pp. 3, 10; Foucault, 'The Concern for Truth', p. 256; and Michel Foucault, 'Le style de l'histoire', in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 4, p. 654.
 48. Foucault, 'Practicing Criticism', p. 155, and Foucault, 'Is It Really Important to Think?', p. 33.
 49. Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations, 1972–1990*, trans. Martin Joughin, Columbia University Press, New York, 1995, p. 95. For more extensive remarks by Deleuze on the relation between Heidegger and Foucault, see his *Foucault*, trans. Séan Hand, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1988, pp. 107 ff.
 50. For a compelling comparison between Foucault's notion of *déchiffrement* and Heideggerian *Denken*, see Hubert L. Dreyfus, 'Beyond Hermeneutics: Interpretation in Late Heidegger and Recent Foucault', in Gary Shapiro and Alan Sica, eds, *Hermeneutics: Questions and Prospects*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1984, pp. 80–81. Of course there are important and decisive differences between the later Heidegger and Foucault, e.g. the former's stress on 'passive' attunement to the historical sendings of Being is to be distinguished from the latter's more local and detailed genealogies that promote new ways of (actively) speaking the truth.
 51. Foucault, 'Practicing Criticism', p. 155; Foucault, 'Truth, Power, Self', pp. 9–10; Foucault, 'Is It Really Important to Think?', pp. 33–34; Foucault, 'Preface to *The History of Sexuality*, Volume II', pp. 334–6; and Foucault, 'Le style de l'histoire', p. 654.
 52. Foucault, 'Foucault, Michel, 1926–', p. 318. On Foucault's sense of the systematicity of his own critical enterprise, see 'What is Enlightenment?', pp. 47–9.
 53. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p. 151. Cf. Foucault, 'La vérité et les formes juridiques', p. 552.
 54. Earlier, in *The Order of Things*, Foucault had developed a related analysis of the fissure in the modern episteme between the 'I think' and the 'I am' (pp. 324–5).
 55. Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, p. 12.
 56. Foucault, 'Truth, Power, Self', pp. 10, 14; Foucault, 'Preface to *The History of Sexuality*, Volume II', p. 334; Foucault, 'The Art of Telling the Truth', p. 89; Foucault, 'The Concern for the Truth', p. 256; and Foucault, 'Foucault, Michel, 1926–', pp. 314 ff.
 57. Foucault, 'Foucault, Michel, 1926–', p. 314. See also Foucault, 'Practicing Criticism', p. 156, and Foucault, 'Is It Really Important to Think?', pp. 33–4.
 58. Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, p. 29.
 59. Michel Foucault, 'The Political Technology of Individuals', in *Technologies of the Self*, p. 145; Foucault, 'The Art of Telling the Truth', p. 95; and Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?', p. 32.
 60. Foucault, 'The Art of Telling the Truth', p. 95, and

- Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?'. See also Foucault, 'Politics and Reason', in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, pp. 59 ff.; Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', p. 216; Michel Foucault, 'An Ethics of Pleasure', in *Foucault Live*, p. 269; Foucault, 'The Art of Telling the Truth', p. 95; Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, pp. 8–9; Foucault, 'Foucault, Michel, 1926–', p. 314; and Foucault, 'The Ethic of Care', p. 20.
61. Foucault, 'The Art of Telling the Truth', p. 88.
 62. Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment', pp. 33–34. See also Michel Foucault, 'Power and Sex', in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, p. 121; Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', p. 216; Foucault, 'The Political Technology of Individuals', p. 145; Foucault, 'How Much Does It Cost', p. 251; Michel Foucault, 'Critical Theory/Intellectual History', in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, pp. 35–6; Foucault, 'The Art of Telling the Truth', pp. 87–90; and Michel Foucault, 'The Masked Philosopher', in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, p. 330.
 63. For an instance of Foucault's use of the term 'reproblemization', see Michel Foucault, 'A propos de la généalogie de l'éthique: un aperçu de travail en cours', in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 4, p. 612. For a brief explication of reproblemization, cf. Graham Burchell, 'Liberal Government and the Techniques of Self', in *Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, Neo-Liberalism, and Rationalities of Government*, ed. Andrew Barry, Thomas Osborne and Nikolas Rose, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996, p. 31.
 64. Michel Foucault, 'Politics and Ethics: An Interview', in *The Foucault Reader*, p. 376.
 65. On the 'we' of politics, see Foucault, 'Polemics, Politics, and Problemizations', p. 385.
 66. Michel Foucault, 'A propos des faiseurs d'histoire', in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 4, p. 313.
 67. See the 1980 text 'Questions of Method', in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1991, pp. 76–8.
 68. Foucault, 'How Much Does It Cost', p. 252. See also 'Is It Really Important to Think?', p. 34.
 69. Foucault, 'Practicing Criticism', p. 156. This passage pre-dates the notion of problemization (and presents a somewhat different account of thought), but it is nevertheless germane to Foucault's final redescription.
 70. Cf. Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', p. 211. For earlier remarks on the status of philosophy in modernity, cf. *The Order of Things*, pp. 219–21.
 71. On the imperatives of modern knowledge, see Foucault, *The Order of Things*, pp. 327–8. My thanks to Jason Wirth for refocusing my attention on this passage.
 72. Foucault, 'The Concern for Truth', pp. 257–8. See also Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, pp. 11–12.
 73. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, Pantheon, New York, 1978, p. 109. Cf. Michel Foucault, 'Sexual Choice, Sexual Act', in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, p. 230; and Foucault, 'The Concern for Truth', p. 262.
 74. Foucault also began explicitly employing the notion of problemization in his last historical studies. For example, the second chapter of the introductory section of *The Use of Pleasure* is entitled 'Forms of Problemization', while part one of the main body of the same study is designated 'The Moral Problemization of Pleasures'. Further, the subtitle of his 1983 Berkeley lectures on ancient truth-telling is *The Problemization of Parrhesia*.
 75. See Andrew Thacker, 'Foucault's Aesthetics of Existence', *Radical Philosophy* 63, Spring 1993, pp. 13–21.
 76. See my 'Repetition and Ethics in Late Foucault', forthcoming, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*.

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