

Theoretical Psychology

Critical Contributions

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Selected Proceedings of the Ninth Biennial Conference of
The International Society for Theoretical Psychology
Calgary, Alberta, Canada June 3-8, 2001

2003

Captus University Publications

Archaeology and Contradiction¹

An Existential Critique of Foucault's Theory of Discursive Practice

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SUMMARY

Foucault's work can be understood as defined by a contradiction: his denial of the knowing subject is only intelligible in terms of the transcendental grounds Foucault rejects as untenable. This contradiction manifests most sharply in his notion of archaeology, wherein his theory of discursive practice is exemplified. This paper traces the roots of the contradiction to Foucault's misreading of Merleau-Ponty, whose appropriation of phenomenology rejects the transcendental component and offers an existential account of situated subjectivity. Merleau-Ponty's account of discursive practice plays out in a developmental oscillation that centers and decenters the subject in relation to the subject's historical, discursive, and cultural situation. I argue that Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology cogently critiques Foucauldian archaeology and offers a viable non-contradictory alternative for a theory of discursive practice.

The contemporary debate in the human sciences that has polarized itself around the opposition between structure and agency is of fundamental concern to psychology. While the origins and contributions to the structure-agency debate are many, Foucault's work clearly figures as crucial. In his archaeological approach to discursive practice, he explicitly refuses to theorize a subject and anticipates the current emphasis on discourse within psychology. I understand this emphasis to be an important and much-welcomed elaboration of the debate, albeit one that falls too heavily on the 'structure' side. My own interest lies in redressing this imbalance through a focus on agency (Peet, 2002). In the present article I critique Foucauldian archaeology from the point of view of Merleau-Ponty's existential account of situated subjectivity. Adopting the thesis that all Foucault's work is marked by a singular contradiction, that of requiring the transcendental grounds which he rejects for his position to have any force, I argue that Merleau-Ponty offers a more viable theory of discursive practice for psychology by *not* bypassing the subject. In developing this argument, I attempt to clarify the relation of Foucault's theorizing to Merleau-Ponty's as well as assess their respective rejections of transcendental idealism, contrasting Foucault's (contradictory) position to Merleau-Ponty's dialectic approach.

¹ I would like to thank the Social Sciences & Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) for their funding support, Doctoral Fellowship # 752-99-1198.

SITUATING FOUCAULT: ARCHAEOLOGY

To best gain a grasp on Foucault's contradiction, I begin with the following citation, wherein Foucault (1970) makes an uncharacteristically explicit statement about what he stands for or against.

If there is one approach that I do reject, however, it is that (one might call it, broadly speaking, the phenomenological approach) ... which, in short, leads to a transcendental consciousness. It seems to me 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. (p. xiv)

Foucault rejects the phenomenological approach, "broadly" defined. Under this broad definition, Foucault combines transcendental philosophy, idealism, phenomenology, and existentialism, as represented by figures such as Kant, Hegel, Husserl, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty. Closer inspection of his work makes clear that Foucault considers Merleau-Ponty representative of this approach. Insofar as these philosophical luminaries underwrite a "theory of the knowing subject", they should be discarded in favour of a "theory of discursive practice", which is best exemplified by his own work, i.e., by an archaeology that reveals the *episteme* that defines the possibilities of speech and thought for a particular period, composed of numerous social systems which decenter the subject, obviating any need to theorize such a subject. Archaeology is that method of "historical analysis of scientific discourse" which takes place 'outside' transcendental or empirical claims, uncovering the "positive unconscious", "space of knowledge", "historical *a priori*", or "systems of positivities" (1970, pp. x-xxiv, *passim*), that define the (particular) conditions of possibility for the classifications of order at a given time, and which presumably do not require the assumption of a "knowing subject" to make intelligible.

What is of especial importance for Foucault is archaeology's bypassing of the "knowing subject". Foucault's theory of discursive practice would not incorporate a theory of the knowing subject but would exclude the latter altogether. My argument is that it is here that the contradiction emerges for Foucault proves able to bypass the subject only by way of appeal to the selfsame transcendental grounds he rejects as untenable. I further argue that all of his work can be oriented to this contradiction of a subject-free theory of discursive practice. Doing so immediately affords a rough schematization of his work into three periods, in terms of the status of his thought in relation to its defining contradiction: (1) His early works in the 1950s, where the contradiction is one of incoherence. (2) His archaeologies of the 1960s and 1970s where the contradiction is constitutive and productive. (3) His last volumes on sexuality, where the contradiction proves secondary to other concerns.

The sphere of Foucault's work that is under criticism is that of the second period. It is in this period that the contradiction occupies the foreground, and that Foucault offers archaeology as a theory of discursive practice that bypasses the subject. The roots of the contradiction, however, trace to his conflating of 'the' phenomenological approach with the transcendental perspective. This conflation reveals Foucault's misreading of Merleau-Ponty (whose existential revision of phenomenology

Foucault assimilates, erroneously, to Husserl's transcendental idealist version), a misreading that proves crucial for unraveling the contradiction.

Foucault's misreading of Merleau-Ponty, which dates from his student days, can be precisely determined. On the one hand, we know the years Foucault attended Merleau-Ponty's courses (1947-1949).² We can reconstruct Foucault's initial position from his earliest writings, keeping in mind the salient fact that he will later utterly disavow this position. We can also assess the degree to which Foucault (1970) considered Merleau-Ponty significant in his major work on the human sciences, wherein Foucault takes aim at Merleau-Ponty as his principal target. All these determinations of Foucault's archaeological perspective (of his second period) can then be set up in counterpoint to Merleau-Ponty's existential position as outlined in the courses he taught and texts published that Foucault would have attended and read.³ I argue that what emerges upon this comparison is a cogent critique of Foucauldian archaeology and a viable, non-contradictory alternative theory of discursive practice that incorporates but does not 'enthroned' the "knowing subject".

FOUCAULT'S INITIAL POSITION

Foucault's first publication "Maladie mentale et personnalité", was published in 1954. The first half of the work gives a historical survey of the psychiatric and psychological treatments of "possibilities" of mental illness. In 1954, the second half was intended—and note, the intent is transcendental—to provide an outline of their "conditions of possibility". Upon revision in the later 1950s, Foucault shifts to a structural and historical account focused on the discourse constructing mental illness, which is no longer illness as such but "a projection of cultural themes" (1987/1962, p. 63). The result is to render the overall work incoherent; Foucault's later insights that are to develop into archaeology are fundamentally and dramatically incompatible with his own earlier position. Deeply dissatisfied with the text Foucault unsuccessfully attempts to block its publication before settling with an utter disavowal of it. Foucault's other 1954 publication, an introduction to a Binswanger book, is equally revealing of his initial perspective: he unequivocally states his intention "to present a form of analysis... whose principles and methods are determined from the start by the absolute privilege of their object: man" (1986/1954, p. 31). Foucault's initial position of his first period is that of an existential-phenomenological, transcendental anthropology; the one position he uncharacteristically singles out explicitly in order to reject proves to have been his own.

² According to Eribon (1991) Foucault "never missed a single lecture" (p. 32) at the Ecole Normale Supérieure. Foucault corroborates this to some degree in an interview: "When we were young, it was Merleau-Ponty who counted, not Sartre. We were fascinated by him" (cited in Macey, 1993, p. 33).

³ The translator's preface (Merleau-Ponty, 1973a, pp. xxxii-xi) outlines the courses and themes Merleau-Ponty was working on between 1946 and 1953, which is invaluable for determining what Merleau-Ponty's concerns were at the time Foucault was in attendance.

FOUCAULT'S TARGET: OUTDOING MERLEAU-PONTY

Foucault's second period is defined by his undertaking numerous archaeologies (of medical perception, of the human sciences, of knowledge, etc.). In *The order of things* (1970) he explicitly rejects the phenomenological approach, and here Merleau-Ponty is clearly, albeit implicitly, his principal target. Chapter 1 begins with a brilliant analysis of Velazquez' painting *Las Meninas*, an analysis that concludes with Foucault's proclaiming the "disappearance" or "eliding" (p. 16) of the "sovereign subject" who is the foundation of representation, a proclamation that is also the book's famous thesis of man's "erasure", "like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea" (p. 387). That Foucault chooses to establish his thesis on an analysis of painting as paradigmatic, an analysis that not only sets the stage for the book but proves essential throughout and significantly is returned to in the pivotal final sections, is not merely writer's license. It is also polemical. The analysis owes not only its vocabulary (of visibility and invisibility, of "necessary disappearances," of gaze and gesture, and so on) to Merleau-Ponty's aesthetic analyses, but also its fundamental premise: Foucault's assertion that "Perhaps there exists, in this painting by Velazquez, the representation as it were, of Classical representation" (p. 16) directly opposes Merleau-Ponty's claim (1964a) that "Man does not paint painting" (p. 80). Further support for Foucault's taking aim at Merleau-Ponty can be adduced from Chapter 2, "The prose of the world". The title is taken directly from a book Merleau-Ponty (1973b) had once been working on. In a prospectus composed in 1952 (toward which his thinking of the late 1940s and early 1950s was aiming), Merleau-Ponty (1964b) mentions proposed work analyzing literature and language to be entitled "*Introduction à la prose du monde*" (p. 9), a title taken in turn from Hegel. Merleau-Ponty sketches out his intentions to address Hegelian themes concerning "the history of thought", "the works of the spirit", and "the development" of a "single experience" in which "truth capitalizes itself" (p. 9); above all, to explicate the notion that "the least use of language implies an idea of truth" (p. 10). Merleau-Ponty argues that we "rejoin the classical questions of metaphysics" (p. 10), *not* to repeat their answers (e.g., some total system), but to affirm our historical and linguistic situation which implies possibilities we must address, which commits us to positions we must take responsibility for, and which calls us to aim at projects that have defined us and remain unfinished. Foucault (1970), on the other hand, claims at the end of his version of "the prose of the world" that "what [literature] is trying to say, of its 'ideas,' of what it promises, or of what it commits one to... *matters little: all that is merely incidental*" (p. 44. Emphases mine.). Foucault's counterpoint to Merleau-Ponty could not be more stark. The concerns that occupy the latter as the most fundamental and pressing for contemporary thought are dismissed by Foucault as "incidental": the analyses of the opening chapters are meant to outdo those of the author of "Phenomenology and the sciences of man" (1964b) in order to set the stage for his own "Archaeology of the human sciences."

This last point concludes my claim that Merleau-Ponty is Foucault's principal target. The point also serves as a relevant bridge to my less easily demonstrated claim that Foucault's archaeology is definable by a contradiction best understood by way of its roots in his misreading of Merleau-Ponty. The starkness of the contrast

between their respective positions on history and language, or more broadly, of their relation to the past, proves revealing precisely in that both are attempting to supercede the transcendental subject.

SUPERCEDING TRANSCENDENTALISM

Merleau-Ponty wishes to "rejoin classical questions", by which he does not intend to simply repeat Hegel. He wants to resume the philosophical work implied in Hegel's account, which means *recuperating* its meaning—ideally, its truth—while denying its totalizing aim. He attempts to do so through 'existentializing' phenomenology. Foucault's denial appears more radical: he claims the concerns that occupy Merleau-Ponty "matter little" and are "merely incidental." This denial is in keeping with his explicit *rejection* of the "broadly phenomenological" approach and desire to bypass the "knowing subject." Adumbrating in even more dramatic fashion, Foucault (1970) further argues that

...in fact the search for a nature or a history of knowledge... already presupposes the use of a certain critique—a critique that is not the exercise of pure reflection, but the result of a series of more or less *obscure divisions... [that] are arbitrary.* (p. 319. Emphases mine.)

The last of the series of "obscure," "arbitrary" divisions that Foucault mentions is that of the order of "truth itself" (p. 320). Over against the audacity of a Kant, a Hegel, or a Husserl, who claim to articulate the universal foundation of knowledge as grounded in the transcendental subject (whether conceived in terms of *a priori* faculties, the realization of absolute reason in history, or the constitutive intentionality of the transcendental ego), Foucault (1970) audaciously argues that these quests for ultimate foundations are "incidental," "arbitrary," and that they in fact "do not indicate *the permanence of an ever-open question*; they refer back to a precise and extremely well-determined epistemological arrangement in history" (p. 346. Emphases mine.). Can Foucault be right about this historicist judgment of his predecessors? If he is, it is only by virtue of his arrogating the capability to step outside that history (i.e., assume a transcendental position) in order to judge; in Foucault's words (1972), "to define a particular site by the exteriority of its vicinity" (p. 17). The judgment that a position is incidental, or arbitrary, or that a question posed is not "permanently ever-open", is not a historical judgment, unless history is somehow—i.e., abstractly—"closed" or 'final.' My argument is that Foucault can only justify these judgments, and therefore his archaeologies and his bypassing of the knowing subject, by way of recourse to the transcendental grounds he rejects as untenable.

One implication of this contradiction: if in the "least use of language" an understanding exists that "implies" a universal truth of history, then it also follows, following the implication in reverse, that denial of the universal truth of history as "arbitrary" leads to the denial of the possibility of understanding, an implication that is clearly unacceptable. In this paper, the implication of concern for psychology is that a theory of discursive practice that bypasses the knowing subject is not viable.

Ironically, a viable alternative is to be found in Merleau-Ponty's existential approach to language that he was developing in the years when Foucault was attending his lectures, the approach that Foucault misreads and conflates with Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. Unlike Foucault, Merleau-Ponty attempts to supersede the transcendental tradition not through rejecting it wholesale but through recuperating its meaning. By way of introduction to Merleau-Ponty's alternative I consider the problematic undergirding Foucault's contradictory understanding in terms of a 'recuperative' relation to the past.

For Hegel, to know a limit was to overcome it, and the endpoint of dialectic the realization of the absolute identity of reason in history. In Foucault's rejection of the "sovereign" consciousness of this transcendental subject of history, what Foucault appears to assume but simultaneously leaves unaccounted for is the synthesizing activity that Hegel claims occurs through history, and that the historian extracts after the fact. That is, for the historian to understand at all, there must be some recuperation of the past which will not be the past as it was but a sort of synthesis. At the minimum, to understand is to have recuperated (some part of) the past. If we accept the presumption that in the basic act of understanding which is necessary in order for there to be a history at all there is a recuperation of the past in its synthesis to the present, then the question of the status of what has been recuperated—essential? true? arbitrary?—is unavoidably raised, as is the totalizing implication inherent in such judgments.

The synthetic activity that is basic to understanding in general and exemplified by historical understanding in particular would seem to be an inescapable condition for any discussion, including Foucault's. Although to be sure a "sovereign consciousness" may not be necessary to pursue the discussion or make sense of the synthetic act, the synthetic activity itself cannot be "rejected". What needs to be denied are the totalizing conclusions that transcendental philosophy makes, and to do so requires a thematizing of this synthetic activity. Foucault bars himself from undertaking this thematizing because it takes place within the sort of "knowing subject" he wishes to bypass, and in doing so is led into contradiction. For Foucault, as I outlined above, the subject is no subject at all, but is decentered into diverse systems that compose his chimerical possibility (economic, linguistic, cultural, political, and so on). This means there is nothing to recuperate from transcendental idealism, or from its heir phenomenology; there is no truth here. As cited above, the claim in *The order of things* (1970) is that all the anthropological, humanist, consciousness-centered talk of transcendental philosophy, of idealism, of phenomenology, and according to Foucault, of Merleau-Ponty's existentialism as well, takes place in an epistemologically-determined space defined by a certain historical *a priori* of discourse and revealed archaeologically, and that it is an arbitrarily-defined space. But in order to make this claim, Foucault relies on the very transcendental grounds he rejects.

MERLEAU-PONTY: RECUPERATING PHENOMENOLOGY

Merleau-Ponty utilizes the synthetic act of recuperating the past basic to historical understanding in a manner far different than that undertaken in idealism. But he does not unconditionally give up, or completely reject, the position; he acknowledges, works with, and works from the inescapable recuperative, synthetic activity in an immediately relevant way—immediately relevant in the sense that the very synthetic activity he assumes is required in order to supercede the idealist position. In doing so, however, is Merleau-Ponty not assuming the sovereignty of a knowing subject standing outside history? I would argue he is, but that this would only be half the truth: for in assuming that position, insofar as it is a type of coherent achievement of understanding, the inquirer could be truthfully said to stand at the end of history, as the fulfillment of its meaning, and so on. But the other half of the truth is that this very achievement threatens the subject's solidarity; the subject has had to change himself (or, allow himself to be changed through an act of submission to the past, a willful surrender to an other, to a truth irreducible to his 'subjectivity').

Merleau-Ponty, in his thinking through Husserl's phenomenological project after 1945 (and, crucially, after Merleau-Ponty's discovery of Saussure), moves away from the transcendental preoccupation. Merleau-Ponty (1973a) claims that Husserl's work possesses "an orientation toward intersubjectivity," which is "the possibility of starting without positing the primordial *cogito*, starting with a consciousness which is neither self nor others" (pp. 44–45). Merleau-Ponty approves of this possibility, however he charges that, "at the frontier of an intersubjective conception, Husserl finally maintains an integral transcendental subjectivity" (p. 45). This takes Merleau-Ponty into confrontation and rethinking of the transcendental idealist aspects of phenomenology, of which Hegel is the formidable representative, in order to offer an existentialist account of situation.

Reflection on language now consists not in returning to a transcendental subject, disengaged from all actual linguistic situations, but to a speaking subject who has no access to any truth nor to any thought with a claim to universality except through the practice of his language in a definite linguistic situation. ... We must become aware of this paradox—that we never free ourselves from the particular except by taking over a situation that is all at once, and inseparably, both limitation and access to the universal. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b, p. 82)

From this quotation it is clear that Merleau-Ponty rejects Husserl's transcendental subject, without therefore rejecting phenomenology, and that his notion of discursive practice considers the *speaking* subject, who is not synonymous with the "knowing subject," as both indispensable and endlessly problematic, and certainly, *not* a "sovereign" subject.

EXISTENTIALIZING IDEALISM: 'ENDLESS DEVELOPMENT'

That the subject is certainly not "sovereign" for Merleau-Ponty entails that the subject cannot be understood solely as a central autonomous, self-contained

coherence. However, that this interpretation is possible at all suggests that it is not sheer fantasy, but rather an abstraction that mis-takes part for whole. Instead, in raising the question of truth, in recuperating the past, the centered subject's contrary is its *decentering* into history, language, and culture. The paradigmatic instance of this decentering is in the use of language. The central concern of Merleau-Ponty, post-1946, is to assimilate Saussure's notion of meaning in difference. Multiple centers within a totality of signs are possible, to such an extent that Merleau-Ponty makes the claim that "The absence of a sign can be a sign, and expression is not the adjustment of an element of discourse to each element of meaning, but an operation of language upon language which suddenly is thrown out of focus toward its meaning" (1964a, p. 44). Similarly, the 'subject' is constituted through a continuous throwing out and regaining of focus, in a centering-decentering movement. *The synthetic act basic to history and understanding recuperates the past in its meaning*, which always and simultaneously both carries a sense of, and implies an idea of, truth; ideally, it changes the meaning of the past into its truth.

How does Merleau-Ponty elaborate this notion of truth? The account Merleau-Ponty puts forward is one that is endlessly developmental. Merleau-Ponty's first academic appointment was in Child Psychology & Pedagogy; one of his more famous courses (taught in 1949) was "Consciousness and the acquisition of language" (Merleau-Ponty, 1973a). His developmental notion is best exemplified in the phenomenological description of learning language in the broadest sense: not only the child acquiring natural language, but also the reader learning the particular style and vocabulary of a writer, or the writer learning through her own writing.

Phenomenologically, language is a systematic organization of signs that we learn not primarily by 'memorizing,' but through a gradual inhabiting of its sensible structure such that we speak it. This takes time; it cannot be forced by an act of will, but demands an active relinquishment of our habitual willfulness so as to impress upon our less-habitually requested passivity the modulations of its rhythms, sounds, and patterns, until we employ these as effortlessly as our body to confirm, through their expression, intentions we could not have known we had. That these define us, if only provisionally, should astonish us endlessly—unless we insist, and why we insist, on that passivity through which signification occurs quite outside any effort or will I could call mine. But this miracle of signification glibly passed over as 'speaking,' which like one's body is constantly appropriated and made one's own in the service of other ends, gets tired quickly, and also bored, and again by turns wills, desires, demands, rebels, and runs against the grain of the very astonishment it incites. In the self-same acts that realize one's body and one's language as the means to explore the world one discovers the limits they set, too. For Merleau-Ponty this paradox of "limitation and access" also holds for truth.

Truth's universality cannot be a totalizing hegemony, but an intersubjective, partial understanding that orients the subject in terms of totalizing implications. Only the transcendental idealism of a Hegel, which makes of a particular abstract conception of reason an absolute, could claim that the endpoint of knowledge is Godhood, truth an overcoming of the contingencies of body, language and time, and the philosopher the thinker of 'God's thought before creation.' But to reject Hegel's totalizing of an abstraction, as Merleau-Ponty and Foucault assuredly do, leaves

unresolved the nature of their relations to Hegel. Tellingly, Foucault aims for an *equally total* rejection, judging transcendental philosophy as "arbitrary" in favor of an *equally abstract* reification of suprapersonal linguistic structures. Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, has been working toward a theory of discursive practice that consistently refuses the centered subject an utter autonomy.

CONCLUSION

Merleau-Ponty's existential perspective, which focuses on the subject's situatedness, criticizes Foucault's anti-essentialist ambitions and contradictory archaeology, finding it as impossible as Hegel's totalizing essentialism. Merleau-Ponty (1964a) puts it in the following way:

"You believe you think for all times and all men," the sociologist says to the philosopher, "and by that very belief you only express the preconceptions or pretensions of your culture." That is true, but it is no less true of the dogmatic sociologist than it is of the philosopher. *Where does he speak from*, the sociologist who speaks in this way? The sociologist can only form this idea of an historical time which allegedly contains philosophers as a box contains an object by placing himself outside history in turn and claiming the privileged position of absolute spectator. (p. 109, original emphases.)

Merleau-Ponty's model for a solution to this is based upon the experience of learning language as a privileged case of using language. We oscillate between the first-person center that can rightfully be viewed as the achievement of an autonomous subject; and a third-person process, an impersonal decentering into discourse, community, history, and so on. In this development, of not only our selves but our language and our tradition, we find ourselves initiated into its questions and mysteries such that, if we reflect, we should experience the demand placed upon us to be faithful to our past, to exercise a fidelity to those who have gone before us, and recuperate the best, or the truth, or at least the meaning, of what they implied. One responds maximally to what the unfinished intentions of one's tradition calls for. The least use of language means the subject is already caught up in tradition and the inescapable presumption of understanding, and dimly intimated beyond this presumption, the idea of truth. Not least of what is implied is a presumptive universality, to even our least understanding of things, and that this understanding depends on, even as it is constituted through, that strange actively passive relinquishing of one's own will and self to allow one's language, one's tradition, and others, teach us what we must already intimate.

A theory of discursive practice has to include an account of the subject or else it falls into contradiction. All discursive practice necessarily and inescapably works through a subject in an action upon the past that is an attempt at recuperating its meaning, or even its truth. We never escape history, just as we never escape ourselves, but in the self-same act of realizing this inescapable contingency emerges the paradoxical implication that we do.

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