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***Michel Foucault: Power/Knowledge and  
Epistemological Prescriptions***

Department of Philosophy

**Spring 2004**

**Philosophy 395 Honors Thesis**

**Supervising Professor: Ladelle McWhorter**

**Philosophy Department – University of Richmond**

This document was accepted as part of the honors requirement for the Philosophy Department Honors Program.

James H. Hall, Department Chair

Michel Foucault: Power/Knowledge and  
Epistemological Prescriptions

Martin Allen Hewett

Honors Thesis

University of Richmond Philosophy Department

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## I. Introduction

In an interview in 1977, seven years before his death, Michel Foucault made the following profound and controversial statement:

*Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint.<sup>1</sup>*

Within this sentence lies perhaps his most contested assertion: that knowledge is not some property of statements or beliefs that exist separately from relations of power within societies and discourses, but is constituted by and constitutive of them. Foucault's genealogies of sexuality and punishment are the most notable means by which he develops this claim, and their own potent explanatory powers leave us with an urge to apply his re-conception of knowledge and power elsewhere. Foucault re-describes knowledge in a way we almost instinctively find wrong at first; an understanding that leads many to believe that understanding knowledge in such a way doesn't constitute any understanding of *knowledge* at all.

Foucault's genealogies, however, are not so easily silenced. Foucault's work is applied to epistemology so much because of his distinct and compelling descriptions of how knowledge actually has operated in history. Foucault's work cannot, however, be applied to and compared to epistemology in the same way as we might compare and contrast two theories of modern epistemology. The genealogy is a distinct kind of project, and not only does he construct compelling descriptions of power and knowledge and their operations, but he also offers prescriptions for the direction that intellectuals and critical thought should take.

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power" in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings From 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 131.

Michel Foucault was not precisely an epistemologist, and did not develop a theory of epistemology. He does, however, have much to say about how knowledge has operated in history, and how it can be dangerous. Barry Smart voices a normal scholarly concern with Foucault's work: "[i]n short, what is considered to be missing from the work is a recommendation or direction for action, an answer to the question 'What is to be done?'"<sup>2</sup> (Smart 166) In this paper I will attempt not only to accurately reconstruct what Foucault has to say about power and knowledge, while defending him from dismissal by those who would reject his work because the familiar terms of epistemology do not directly translate into methods by which to judge his claims, but also to chart out exactly what Foucault thinks "is to be done," particularly in regards to epistemology and intellectuals "doing things like" epistemology.

Foucault's genealogical redescriptions of the historical operations of knowledge and power do have legitimate contributions to make to epistemology, particularly in incorporating an understanding of how knowledge actually operates into making prescriptions for the path that epistemology should take. In this paper I will resist translating Foucault into familiar epistemological categories, and instead attempt to accurately assess these prescriptions. I will first investigate how we can understand Foucault's work on power and knowledge, despite its irregularity to epistemology proper, by reconstructing and clarifying his arguments and defending them from critics. I will next reconstruct, assess, and draw from two recent and important attempts to translate Foucault into epistemological terms and categories. Finally, I will reconstruct Foucault's views of the role of the intellectual in light of the propositional conclusions of Foucault's work on power and knowledge, and map through the example of feminist epistemology the role that epistemology and epistemologists should take as a

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<sup>2</sup> Barry Smart, "The Politics of Truth and the Problem of Hegemony," in *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Couzens Hoy (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 166.

consequence of Foucault's work. Foucault and the implications of his work on knowledge and power compels a new understanding of the role of the intellectual, the role of the epistemologist, and a vision for the structure and aims of epistemology itself, and this paper is meant to chart out this new understanding..

## II. What is Foucault Trying to Do?

Locating Foucault's work on power and knowledge in regards to its possible prescriptions for epistemology first requires understanding that work, and defending it from possible objections. We must understand first what exactly Foucault is trying to say about power and knowledge; what his conception entails for considerations of his *own* work; and in what manner his genealogies make themselves available for use in charting out a new course for theory, particularly epistemology. In Part II, I will investigate Foucault's conclusions about how power has historically operated and how it has been linked to knowledge, through a particular focus on *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality Volume I*. As important as understanding Foucault's conclusions about power and knowledge is understanding the method by which he investigates their historical operations; I will describe the method by which Foucault investigates truth and knowledge in the genealogy, as well as power, through an analytics of power (as opposed to a theory of power). Finally, I will defend Foucault against three major criticisms of his work: that he is forced into holding that there is no difference between power and knowledge, that he discounts the possibility of progress through theory, and that his work rejects any legitimacy by which we might accept it over others. Foucault's defense against these charges will be crucial to understanding his contributions to epistemology – to ascertain these

contributions, we must first defend Foucault against charges that the very nature and conclusions of his work deny any possibility for prescriptions for epistemology.

#### A. The Historical Operations of Power

The first work in which Foucault lays out a comprehensive account of the operations of power and knowledge, and the method by which he hopes to investigate them, is *The History of Sexuality Volume I*.<sup>3</sup> The most important historical argument to come out of *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, and the method by which Foucault offers a new description of the historical deployment of sexuality, is his refutation of the Repressive Hypothesis. Foucault begins by setting up the story he wishes to criticize – the typically held historical belief that in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, people weren't very sexually repressed, but by the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the Victorian Era attempted to eradicate sexuality from public life. What could not be eradicated was limited and banished to the brothel or the asylum. Foucault investigates the supposed sexual repression of the Victorian Era more carefully – prohibitions seemed to encourage sex to pop up in other places. Government, as a result, suddenly became very interested in sexual discourse with the new concept of population. Government officials realized they couldn't make war and wealth without *knowing* their resources, that is, their citizens, and the characteristics and numbers of those citizens. A new focus of inquiry arose around this new discipline and property of persons called "sexuality," not to repress it, but because government officials saw it as central to knowing their population, and thereby increasing its own strength and potential for growth.

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<sup>3</sup> Foucault did, however, begin sketches of the methodology of *The History of Sexuality Volume I* in other works, most notably in *Discipline and Punish*.



Sexuality was a tool by which populations were better administered; the purpose was not to destroy or suppress sexuality, but to focus upon and isolate it in an attempt to know it, and then manage it. This new type of power Foucault calls “Bio-Power” – bio-power is a type of power that focuses on the regulation of populations and the control of bodies. Even more importantly, however, is the method by which bio-power operates; it operates through the characterization of *norms*. Data began to be collected that specifically focused on population numbers, the growth and development of humans, and facts about the rates of pregnancy and fertility, which in turn developed norms concerning human health standards, development standards, etc. Government officials were able to use this data to help encourage or discourage certain types of developments, sexuality, etc., according to norms.

The “sexualized” body is one example of a historical object of a particular set of “scientific” disciplines; disciplines which, while they produced knowledge about the object, dominated the object as well.<sup>4</sup> These disciplines had in common a collection of tenets and techniques that Foucault refers to as *normalization*: these collected techniques constitute principle ways that disciplines control their own objects. Persons began to be judged according to such norms, and norms became useful within relationships of power because they in turn constructed fields of knowledge, in which “knowing things” was based on “knowing norms.” Norms enable certain types of self reflection and alteration. By being assigned a certain identity, not only are we controlled and managed more efficiently through the acquisition of new knowledge and facts about ourselves, but the dissemination of this knowledge causes the development of norms (often statistical norms), which also causes us to control ourselves, and to manage ourselves, in new ways. We subsequently use our notions of norms, such as those

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<sup>4</sup> Foucault discusses the emergence of disciplines around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, such as biology and anthropology, collectively constituting a collection of “human sciences,” in *The Order of Things*, a work predating his more substantive work on power and knowledge.

having to do with sexuality, to reflect upon and scrutinize ourselves, and thus not only become objects of a specific scientific discipline, but subjects who manage themselves in new ways, or rather, in *normal* ways, as a result of new productions of knowledge.

Norms “dominate” in the sense that they are a principle way in which persons were controlled by knowledge; Bio-power, therefore, is an example of how Foucault’s conception of power is different from the types of juridical power that the classical liberal conception of power has asserted. Foucault distinguishes the juridical notion of power (“[p]ower in this instance was essentially a right of seizure: of things, time, bodies, and ultimately life itself; it culminated in the privilege to seize hold of life in order to suppress it . . .”) from Bio-power, whose method is of a different kind (“ . . . a power bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them.”)<sup>5</sup>

The most important characteristic of power, as drawn out of Foucault’s method in *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, is that it is an ‘ever-present’ reality in discourse- we cannot “rid ourselves” of the problem of power. Power is not reducible to institutions such as the state, because it is not a ‘thing’ to be held. Power is “omnipresent” in discursive relations, as well as non-discursive relations; it is an event that is participated in, and it has different components and effects that go beyond its exercise through domination and subjugation. In *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, Foucault describes power as “the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault *The History of Sexuality Volume I* (New York: Random House, 1978), 136.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 93. The notion of norms and normalization is central to understanding the connection between Foucault’s two most important genealogical works on the relationship between power and knowledge, *The History of Sexuality Volume I* and *Discipline and Punish*. Norms have just as much to do, Foucault discovers, with control and management through knowledge of crimes and criminals as it does through norms of sexuality.

Describing power as “omnipresent,” however, is not meant to be an assertion about some universal characteristic that describes what power *actually* or *always* is. This thing called “power” actually emerges out of relationships within situations. These relationships become organized, reproducing themselves over time, until the appearance of a system emerges that also appears to have strategic goals and organizations. The appearance of such a system in turn has certain effects on the general behavioral options that persons within the system obey, often (and perhaps most visibly) according to societal norms. The overall effect of the organization of these relationships is “power,” and Foucault wants to claim that power is everywhere not because a *thing* called power is *actually* everywhere at all times, or because power relationships are always controlling, but because power *comes from* everywhere – everyone is almost always involved in trying to influence actions and outcomes around them in some way or another. Power is merely a conception of the overall effects of these types of relationships that exist at all levels of society and within discourses.

This description of power is different from what Foucault describes as the traditional conception and explanation of power: the conception of “sovereign power.” This older notion stems from a view of power as a thing to be held, to be exercised only in forms of domination and repression from above upon those below, which manifests itself only in putative mechanics and juridical forms, and whose operations can ultimately be reduced to the process of obedience. As he describes it in *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, “[t]his is the paradox of its effectiveness: it is incapable of doing anything, except to render what it dominates incapable of doing anything either, except for what this power allows it to do.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 85.

Foucault offers five important propositions about the nature of power in *The History of Sexuality Volume I* that are meant to distinguish it from the 'sovereign' conception of power:

1. Power is not a thing that can be acquired; but is "exercised from innumerable points."
2. Power relations are 'imminent' – they are not exterior to other kinds of relations that operate in social relations.
3. Power "comes from below" – no duality exists within power relations between rulers and the ruled, or oppressors and the oppressed. Rather, the types of relationships that result in hegemony and rulers are sustained by local power relationships: "One must suppose rather that the manifold relationships of force that take shape and come into play in the machinery of production, in families, limited groups, and institutions, are the basis for wide-ranging effects of cleavage that run through the social body as a whole."<sup>8</sup>
4. Power is always intentional – power relations do not exist that are supposedly exercised without "aims and objectives." Power is therefore strategic, but does not involve a dominant or knowing subjectivity. The way that power relations manifest themselves within a society, culture, or discourse is fully intentional, but without a specific individual or sovereign source whose objectives and aims might have determined the network of power's strategies.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>9</sup> At first this assertion seems absurd, but Foucault means to describe the way in which more global strategies are created. His position is not that strategies spring from societies without discernable sources or subjective interests, but that the conglomerate of such strategies that constitute more global strategies are not reducible to any one subject. He describes the position thusly: "... let us not look for the headquarters that preside over its [power's] rationality; neither the caste which governs, nor the groups which control the state apparatus, nor those who make the most important economic decisions direct the entire network of power that functions in a society (and makes it function); the rationality of power is characterized by tactics that are often quite explicit at the restricted level where they are inscribed (the local cynicism of power), tactics which, becoming connected to one another, attracting and propagating one another, but finding their base of support and their condition elsewhere, end by forming comprehensive systems: the logic is perfectly clear, the aims decipherable, and yet it is often the case that no one is

5. Power is always accompanied by resistance.<sup>10</sup>

The last proposition about power, at first, seems at odds with everything else Foucault is saying about power. Foucault denies, along with denying the traditional definition of power, that the “essence” of power is domination, or negative force. But if power *cannot* be reduced to forms of domination, why is it always accompanied by resistance? Foucault does not, first of all, understand the resistances that accompany instances of power relations as we might normally think of them; they are not universally opposed to a single form of power, which we would most likely conceive of as the exercise of hegemonic dominations. “But this does not mean that they [resistances] are only a reaction or rebound, forming with respect to the basic domination an underside that is in the end always passive, doomed to perpetual defeat . . . They are the odd term in relations of power; they are inscribed in the latter as an irreducible opposite.”<sup>11</sup> Most important is to understand that resistances are *in* power relations, as a part of them. Just as power relations come from below in all sorts of different arenas to form a “matrix of force relations,”<sup>12</sup> resistances inhabit those power relations as well. Resistances are not therefore external to power relations- they are implicit within them. Because power is *not* domination, but is always a struggle, opposing forces always exist in power relationships. Resistances accompany all power relations, more importantly, because power is not a thing that is held or that is exercised structurally by one person over another; even the dominated participate in power relations, and resistances will vary and fluctuate significantly in different power relations

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there to have invented them, and few who can be said to have formulated them: an implicit characteristic of the great anonymous, almost unspoken strategies which coordinate the loquacious tactics whose “inventors” or decisionmakers are often without hypocrisy.” (See note 4, at 96.)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 94-95.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>12</sup> Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 186.

depending on their different circumstances and characters. Understanding resistance as opposite to power is the result of viewing power from the “sovereign” notion of power.

Joseph Rouse argues that it would be a mistake to reduce Foucault’s treatment and critique of sovereignty to the power of a state or, more importantly, to a kind of power that can be held by a particular person in a “sovereign” position. “Sovereignty in this sense has been removed from any real political location, and is instead a theoretical construction with respect to which political practice is to be assessed . . . His own criticism of this conception of sovereignty should therefore not be seen as another such attempt to hold a sovereign power to account to a higher principle of legitimacy.”<sup>13</sup> Rouse describes the conception of sovereignty as twofold: as first being a standpoint from which coherency and unity is achieved in conflicts, and second, as a standpoint from which legitimacy is conferred upon the determinations of that standpoint. It is precisely these types of standpoints, those which purport to embody legitimacy, that Foucault seeks to critique.<sup>14</sup>

Sovereign power as well as any type of sovereign legitimacy ascribed to bodies of knowledge or knowers cannot be the function by which we critique, administer the genealogy, or claim rightness of standpoint. A dilemma arises, therefore, for if sovereign legitimacy is not available for appealing to, from where do we make knowledge claims that are any more justified than opposing claims? This is a question not only for knowledge claims in general, but for

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<sup>13</sup> Joseph Rouse, “Power/Knowledge,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, ed. Gary Gutting (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 101.

<sup>14</sup> An interesting comparison that highlights the actual nature of sovereignty, in classical liberal thought, is the somewhat outlier of Machiavelli’s *The Prince*. Machiavelli describes the sovereign in this work as a person whose sovereignty (and his dominative power) is something that is achieved and that must be actively maintained, and not a state of being. Machiavelli understands the sovereign, in most cases, as entering into a situation in which power systems and configurations already exist; his charge or purpose is to manipulate these existing configurations, not to neutralize or balance them. This also can be understood out of the common assertion that Machiavelli investigates politics as separate from an investigation of ethics; ethics seems to be more applicable in ascribing to a sovereign a state of being that posits, for example, moral legitimacy. Understanding sovereignty as strictly political, however, focuses on the management of power configurations to one’s own survival and continuance as the sovereign. A sovereign only “holds” sovereignty as long as he can continue to repeat and solidify its effects and controls.

Foucault's own work and its positioning of legitimacy. Foucault himself realizes this problem when discussing disciplinary practices, which is also the focus of his book *Discipline and Punish*:

When today one wants to object in some way to the disciplines and all the effects of power and knowledge that are linked to them, what is it that one does, concretely, in real life, what do the Magistrates Union or other similar institutions do, if not precisely to appeal to this canon of right, this famous, formal right, that is said to be bourgeois, and which in reality is the right of sovereignty? But I believe that we find ourselves here in a kind of blind alley: it is not through recourse to sovereignty against discipline that the effects of disciplinary power can be limited, because sovereignty and disciplinary mechanisms are two absolutely integral constituents of the general mechanism of power in our society.<sup>15</sup>

Appeals to 'sovereignty,' we see here, are actually *mechanisms* of power relationships; in regards to disciplinary practices, the appeal to sovereignty is actually a method by which power exerts itself, but not constitutive of its essence. A look at Foucault's work on disciplinary practices is even more revealing of the nature of power relations, and their relationships to knowledge.

Foucault's propositions about power in *The History of Sexuality Volume I* are all important for understanding the "analytics of power"; they are not to be confused with a theory of power. Foucault's aim is not to give a comprehensive and complete theory of power, but "to move less toward a theory of power than towards an analytics of power: that is, toward a definition of a specific domain formed by power relations and toward a determination of the instruments that will make possible its analysis."<sup>16</sup> His propositions about power are not meant

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<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures" in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings From 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 108.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

to serve as universal properties of a specific phenomena called power, but the common characteristics of power relations that Foucault uncovers in his particular historical genealogies.

Foucault attempts to distance himself from theory because of the danger he sees within it. A theory can function as an element in a regime of normalization – the kind of normalization that is largely what constitutes certain domains and fields of knowledge, as these things are often insidiously determined and categorized in relation to and in comparison to certain types of norms. Theories are meant to be all sorts of things to legitimize themselves and their conclusions: they are meant to be objective, they are meant to be true, and they are especially meant to deal with a particular section of “reality.” Gail Stenstad offers the following characteristic of *good* theory: “[t]he best theory is that which most closely approximates the true and the real. The root assumption is that there really *is* one truth, one reality, and that it is the business of philosophy to give an account of it.”<sup>17</sup> Discussing the nature of theory in relation to feminist struggles against a patriarchic society and knowledge apparatuses, Stenstad advocates a new method of struggle by women that does not fall victim to normalization; she recognizes that even feminist theories that purport to represent all women fail in doing so, because of their own failure to achieve some type of comprehensive coherence that carefully protects against the possibility that new norms within their own represented groups will have normalization effects upon such members. She charges, “[a]dherence to theory results in the creation of in-groups and out-groups (those who ‘see the truth’ and those who do not). Then the divisions and lack of community become issues in themselves, and we think, ‘if only we could devise the ultimate

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<sup>17</sup> Gail Stenstad, “Anarchic Thinking: Breaking the Hold of Monotheistic Ideology on Feminist Philosophy,” in *Women, Knowledge, and Reality*, ed. Ann Garry & Marilyn Pearsall (New York: Routledge, 1989), 332.



feminist theory, the one on which we could all agree.’ Which amounts to saying, ‘if only we were all the same.’”<sup>18</sup>

In an age of heightened normalization, as are those that Foucault investigates, theories tend to operate as tools of disciplines that seek to homogenize experience, and to render it “normal.” The rendering of experience as normal, the re-reading of history and social phenomena under a ‘normal’ lens, will, as Stenstad points out, inevitably lead to some kinds of marginalization; whether it be of persons, groups, or discourses. The ‘normal’s’ correspondence with the ‘real’ that theory attempts to connect will in turn draw the boundaries between the normal and unnatural, the coherent and incoherent, the persuasive and the absurd.

Social theories result in some kinds of globalization or totalizing by this analysis, because they are meant to be taken as true, and meant to apply to and organize all thinking about the world beyond themselves. The assumptions characteristic of theory, those of objectivity, reality, and truth, are rejected by Foucault in his work – each of these “assumptions” are up for grabs as concepts to be critically examined in the genealogy. The genealogy is meant to avoid universalization, and to avoid results that lead to norms and normalization.<sup>19</sup> When Foucault seeks to study concepts such as power through an analytics, therefore, this is the type of result he wishes to avoid, and the reason he wished to avoid any type of theory about power. The entire

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> The work of the post-modernist Jean-Francois Lyotard is particularly comparable to this understanding of the universalization, and resulting dangerousness, of global theories. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard understands discourses in general to have their own specific rules and criteria by which they operate, and therefore rejects the posited status of universal and “foundational” theories. Lyotard believes that such unifying theories can ultimately result in “terroristic and totalitarian” theories, and for this reason advocates a focus on multiple domains, discourses, and investigations rather than theories meant to “unify” discourses. Lyotard argues: “[t]raditional’ theory is always in danger of being incorporated into the programming of the social whole as a simple tool for the optimization of its performance; this is because its desire for unitary and totalizing truth lends itself to the unitary and totalizing practice of the system’s managers.” (Jean-Francois Lyotard *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 12.) Lyotard thus focuses on “language games”(based on Wittgenstein’s thought) and “littler narratives” rather than the sweeping and totalizing meta-narratives characteristic of philosophy during modernism.

process of the “claim to truth” about power purported by classical liberalists, who saw power as operating on the basis of a ‘sovereign’ theory, is itself normalizing, dangerous, and immersed with power relations. It demarcates between those with and without power, and assumes truth, objectivity, and a grasp on reality for itself. Foucault does none of these things, and rather focuses on the operations of power; he offers description, and not theory. Theory cannot help but treat power as a thing; an analytics of power focuses on relationships that constitute a phenomenon that we refer to as power.

## B. Disciplinary Practices and Power/Knowledge

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault expands from his work in the *Birth of the Clinic* to investigate how institutions and new forms of knowledge created new forms of constraint and social control. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault draws perhaps his most comprehensive picture of the nature and relationship of power and knowledge. In examining the rise of the prison system, Foucault investigates the sources of its rise to dominance in the realm of punishment, and how torture began to die out as a viable option for punishment. Foucault investigates the sudden change in disciplinary practices after 1837, from methods of torture and a focus on the body to the rise of the penal process. Instead of interpreting this change through traditional explanations, Foucault describes it, through the genealogy, as the product of a change in the use of power in society.

Foucault opens *Discipline and Punish* with a description of the torture of Damians, charged with regicide for his attempt to kill the King. Foucault recreates through available

sources his torture, including the tearing away of his flesh with pincers, the boiling oil pored over him, and his final quartering and dismemberment. Confessors were present through the entire ordeal, frequently speaking with him and implementing his cries for pardon from God.

Foucault abruptly switches to Leon Faucher's rules 'for the House of young prisoners in Paris,' a timeline for order and discipline in the daily life of each prisoner, including work schedules, rising and sleeping times, eating times, class time, and recreation time. Dated only eighty years after Damiens' torture and execution, it stands in stark contrast to the kind of punishment he endured for his crime. This shift coincided with an equally important reality; a shift in the object of punishment. The object of punishment was no longer the body. Punishment of the body ceased to be a spectacle, and ultimately, it became the "most hidden part of the penal process."<sup>20</sup> Foucault poses the question: how did this transformation in the penal process develop, and what were its causes? Along with the shift in the object of punishment came a shift in the knowledge collected and produced regarding criminals and human psychology, which in turn contributed to a further transformation of the entire penal system itself. A traditional thesis is that as torture and the severity of bodily punishments decreased, "humanity" increased, and its new dictates, as a new form of ethical enlightenment, demanded new states of affairs. Foucault, however, sees another source, another cause: a shift and transformation in the object of discipline and the goals of punishment. Charles Taylor describes it as follows: "The new philosophy of punishment is thus seen as inspired not by humanitarianism but by the need to control. Or rather, humanitarianism itself seems to be understood as a kind of stratagem of the new growing mode of control."<sup>21</sup> It is not that new crimes are punished, but new aspects of existing crimes; this new philosophy of punishment

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<sup>20</sup> Michel Foucault *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House, 1977), 9.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," *Political Theory* 12 (May 1984), 75.

requires new modes of control, and humanitarianism itself, inasmuch as it was appealed to at the time, is an aspect of this new push for control through the discovery of new truths about the crime and the criminal:

. . . 'crime', the object with which penal practice is concerned, has profoundly altered: the quality, the nature, in a sense the substance of which the punishable element is made, rather than its formal definition . . . Certainly the 'crimes' and 'offences' on which judgment is passed are juridical objects defined by the code, but judgment is also passed on the passions, instincts, anomalies, infirmities, maladjustments, effects of environment or heredity; acts of aggression are punished, so also, through them, is aggressivity; rape, but at the same time perversions; murders, but also drives and desires.<sup>22</sup>

New types of knowledge of law-breakers become necessary: "one's estimation of him, what is known about the relations between him, his past and his crime, and what might be expected of him in the future"<sup>23</sup>; in order to discipline these new dimensions of crime. In this, a new ostensible object of punishment is constituted, involving a major shift from the body as the subject of discipline to the *soul*. The need for knowledge about the law-breaker who now is identified by his soul more than his individual crime, and the shift of the object of punishment, creates new truths about the criminal to be 'discovered.' The law-breaker is transformed into a 'criminal,' and criminals as a group become categorized into several subgroups of persons, including the 'delinquent.' "The question is no longer simply: 'Has the act been established and is it punishable?' But also: 'What is this act, what is this act of violence or this murder? To what level or to what field of reality does it belong? Is it a phantasy, a psychotic reaction, a delusional episode, a perverse action?'"<sup>24</sup> Discerning the nature of the crime will have to do with questions about the criminal as a newly posited object, and these questions are accompanied

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<sup>22</sup> See note 20, at 17.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

by questions of how best to treat or ‘cure’ a criminal based on knowledge of him, and knowledge of his soul in relation to his actions. This new type of knowledge, and this search for new truths about the criminal, now permeates the penal process. The severity of the crime could now be altered by truths discovered of the new object of punishment and inquiry; the mad criminal’s crime could not be punished as severely or in the same manner as a sane person. The process of ‘judging’ therefore changed as well: “And the sentence that condemns or acquits is not simply a judgment of guilt, a legal decision that lays down punishment; it *bears within it an assessment of normality and a technical prescription for a possible normalization.*”<sup>25</sup> The power to punish therefore took on extra-judicial determinations, and the constituting of a new object of punishment entailed a whole new field of knowledge about the criminal which, in turn, reinforced a new type of power to punish.

Foucault concludes that such dramatic and sudden changes in disciplinary practices was not the sign of a lessening of the exercise of power in public life; it was a shift in the methods of power through increased control over all aspects of the life of criminals and citizens alike. It was marked by new methods of *normalization*, hierarchies of crimes and criminals, and the institutionalization of disciplinary methods, including a shift in the authority by which criminals are punished and crimes analyzed.

Examining the penal process and the power to punish in terms of the exercise of power involves examining the body as a political entity. Foucault’s examination rejects the conception of power as that of property – as that which is held or possessed by an individual and exercised upon one lacking this property. *Discipline and Punish* “. . . presupposes that the power exercised on the body is conceived not as property, but as a strategy, that its effects of domination are

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 20-21, italics added.

attributed not to 'appropriation', but to dispositions, manoeuvres, tactics, techniques, and functionings; that one should decipher in it a network of relations, constantly in tension, in activity, rather than a privilege that one might possess; that one should take as its model a perpetual battle rather than a contract regulating a transaction or the conquest of a territory."<sup>26</sup>

His conception of relations of power includes the following characteristics:

1. Power is exercised, not possessed or attributed; it involves *relations*.
2. Power is not always exercised as a repressive force against those who we would normally think lack power; it is reinforced by and *involves* those who struggle against it.
3. Power relations are not universal in nature; "they define innumerable points of confrontation, focuses on instability, each of which has its own risks of conflict, of struggles, and of an at least temporary inversion of the power relations."<sup>27</sup>

In sum, investigating power as a situation involving configurations of relations yields a much different conception of power than traditional theories give us. It is constituted as an overall effect of strategic relationships, but it is not a thing that operates universally in a particular way, with a universal essence or characteristic. These propositions about power go beyond an abstract theory of power because they also have to do with employing history as a tool to understand the actual operation of and background behind concepts. More specifically, both *The History of Sexuality Volume I* and *Discipline and Punish* offers an important strategy that is

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 27. Foucault means to say both that power is not a thing that eternally exists in social relations (for he refuses to develop a theory and study it *as a thing*), but also to deny that power relations can be defined by any one operational characteristic.

often common to relations of power, and which has characterized the operation of power and knowledge in the evolution of disciplinary practices. As we've seen, one of the principle ways that power utilizes knowledge within societies and discourses is through *normalization*, especially the normalization to be achieved in the punishment and reform of criminals and "deviants," and the categorization of individuals on the basis of norms such as sexual norms.

### C. The Operations of Power and Knowledge

The nature of power relations then gives Foucault the basis for which to chart a new course for understanding the nature of knowledge, and how power effects or is related to knowledge. In profound words, he says:

Perhaps, too, we should abandon a whole tradition that allows us to imagine that knowledge can exist only where the power relations are suspended and that knowledge can develop only outside its injunctions, its demands and its interests. Perhaps we should abandon the belief that power makes mad and that, by the same token, the renunciation of power is one of the conditions of knowledge. We should admit rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. These 'power-knowledge relations' are to be analyzed, therefore, not on the basis of a subject of knowledge who is or is not free in relation to the power system, but, on the contrary, the subject who knows, the objects to be known and the modalities of knowledge must be regarded as so many effects of these fundamental implications of power-knowledge and their historical transformations. In short, it is not the activity of the subject of knowledge that produces a corpus of knowledge, useful or resistant to power, but power-knowledge, the processes and struggles that traverse it and of which it is made up, that determines the forms and possible domains of knowledge.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 27-28.

Fields of power and corpuses of knowledge are inseparable; they imply one another, determine one another, and constitute one another. In this passage, Foucault makes sweeping conclusions about the investigation of truth, the investigation of power, and how relations of power and knowledge interact with one another. Foucault is suggesting we investigate truth as a concept with a history, and not regard it simply as the property of knowledge that a particular work or argument seeks to achieve. This is crucial to an understanding of what Foucault is doing – he is analyzing truth as a concept that is “of this world,” and whose origins, foundations, and history he can investigate genealogically in the same manner as sexuality, for example. Understanding that knowledge claims and knowledge relations always imply power relationships shifts the focus upon truth from a *quality* held by things to an *effect* of complex relationships. For this reason, Foucault spends more time investigating the relationships of the knower, the kind of objects that are said to be known, and how these relationships of power-knowledge constitute domains and fields of knowledge. The question is not only “what things do we take to be true?” but “*how* have we come to take *certain* things to be true?” Foucault is adamant here – we can only begin to answer this question correctly by studying the power relationships that occur around knowers, objects that are known, and domains of knowledge. This requires that we investigate truth as an effect, as something less than universal, and as something that has developed and changed in history, while refraining from investigating or making claims about its “essence” or “true nature.”

The genealogy will not, at its conclusion, have “discovered truth” – it will have offered a particular argument through careful and meticulous reconstruction of historical facts about how truth has operated in specific discourses and societies. When the notion of sovereign power is rejected, and when we find power relations operating in all sorts of discourses, and in all sorts of



normal everyday realities in our world and society, the preeminent legitimacy of the “power of the truth” is also suspended. Foucault “brackets” the question of the truth or falsity of his work and of his genealogies to study truth *as a historical object*. This does not mean that Foucault is refraining from *saying* anything about truth; he is refraining from *claiming* truth either for his own work, and more importantly, from arguing around the “actual” truth of knowledge claims or bodies of knowledge that the genealogy investigates (that is, he is not attempting to make arguments *for or against* the truth of his own work or the objects of his investigation). As permeated as discourses appear to be with power relations in the conclusions of his specific genealogies, they are also permeated with distinct and accompanying corpuses of knowledge. If truth is analyzed as a “thing of this world,” it must be constituted within realms such as the discursive and the societal – and knowledge, which historically has had something to do with ‘truth’, will always in some way involve a power relation, whether that power relation be silent and subtle or violent and dominative. This is a conclusion about how knowledge and truth operate in discourse, not about their essence, nature, or their actual truth values. To put it simply, there simply is no “truth about truth” in Foucault’s work.

#### D. Criticisms of Power/Knowledge and the Legitimacy of Foucault’s Genealogies:

##### Questions of Power, Truth, and Confusion

It is not that the constant companionship between relations of power and knowledge renders either side *bad*; but it means that knowledge, like power (or at least how we normally

think of power), can be *dangerous*. Foucault says, “My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same thing. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do.”<sup>29</sup> Todd May tries to ease our uneasiness with Foucault’s assertions by reminding us that he is talking about power as something that, while always present in our relations between persons, discourses, and societies, we have had misconceptions about for a long time. “Does this mean that we are to reject any knowledge that proves to be enmeshed in relationships of power? No. To be in a relationship of power is not a mark of immediate rejection, but an invitation to a vigilant investigation. If all practices – discursive or nondiscursive, epistemic or otherwise – are dangerous, that is because power relations are everywhere. The answer to the question of power is not its rejection, however, nor the rejection of practices and discourses that participate in it.”<sup>30</sup>

Not all critics, however, have been this charitable to Foucault. The most powerful criticisms of Foucault’s work on power and knowledge revolve around several key questions: if we accept Foucault’s positions on power-knowledge, then what basis do we have for accepting his work in the first place? Does he not fall into an inescapable chasm caused by the implications of his own work? Does his conception of power not deny the possibility of truth as usually understood by modern epistemology? A consideration of the most powerful of these complaints and objections by Foucault’s critics is necessary to continue the present project: if Foucault in fact does not have anything worthwhile to say about epistemology and its methods, as his critics charge, then it will be futile to investigate what prescriptions his work gives us for

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<sup>29</sup> Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984) 343.

<sup>30</sup> Todd May *Between Genealogy and Epistemology: Psychology, Politics, and Knowledge in the Thought of Michel Foucault* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 113.

modern epistemology. Foucault can be saved from these concerns, however, and this is the first step in ascertaining exactly what kind of “epistemologist” Foucault might be.

In “Foucault on Freedom and Truth,” Charles Taylor develops a critique of Foucault’s conception of power-knowledge that eventually questions the legitimacy of Foucault’s work itself; ultimately he feels Foucault’s position is incoherent. Taylor first takes issue with Foucault’s supposed conception of power as lacking freedom or truth. He first of all rejects the idea that power, if it is an ever-present relation, can lack subjects, even if these subjects of power are not understood in the usual sovereign-power sort of way. “‘Power’ in the way Foucault sees it, closely linked to ‘domination’, does not require a clearly demarcated perpetrator, but it requires a victim,” according to Taylor; “[i]t cannot be a ‘victimless crime’, so to speak. Perhaps the victims also exercise it, also victimize others. But power needs targets. Something must be imposed on someone, if there is to be domination.”<sup>31</sup> Foucault does not deny that domination occurs – he readily accepts that power relations do not exist without corresponding resistances. But by discrediting the possibility of ‘truth’ accompanying power, Taylor charges that his concept of power does not make sense. If individuals can participate in their own subjugation, and power relations are not sovereign in nature, then without ‘truth’ that can be wielded separate from that power, the mask of subjugation cannot be lifted. “Mask, falsehood makes no sense without a corresponding notion of truth. The truth here is subversive of power: it is on the side of the lifting of impositions, of what we have just called liberation. The Foucaultian notion of power not only requires for its sense the correlative notions of truth and liberation, but even the standard link between them, which makes truth the condition of

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<sup>31</sup> See note 21, at 92.

liberation.”<sup>32</sup> Taylor claims that Foucault’s conception of power-knowledge ultimately subordinates truth to power: truth is a function of power, which makes it unintelligible as a component of a power-knowledge relationship. If it is always subordinate to power, and at the discretion of power, how can it *liberate*, how can it *resist*, if the end result will not be a *separation* from power? Taylor thinks Foucault’s ‘regimes of truth’ are really regimes of power. “The regime-relativity of truth means that we cannot raise the banner of truth against our own regime. There can be no such thing as a truth independent of its regime, unless it be that of another. So that liberation in the name of ‘truth’ could only be the substitution of another system of power for this one, as indeed the modern course of history has substituted the techniques of control for the royal sovereignty which dominated the seventeenth century.”<sup>33</sup> There is no gain of truth or gain of freedom in the resistance against power. There is only substitution of regimes of power:

If all truth is imposition, no change can be a gain. But when one moves to challenge this notion, to try to establish more truth about truth, one is met with the rejoinder that as all truth is imposition, there is no place left to stand. That is what I gestured at with “monolithic.” But, in fact, at the core of Foucault’s theory what we have is confusion defending itself with confusion.<sup>34</sup>

This problem, additionally, goes to the very core of what it means to be a human, and what it means to be doing philosophy, which Taylor claims needs a legitimate standpoint:

In order to go on living, we need to proffer or accept some schemata of self-interpretation, and not just denounce the ones that surround us. But all such schemata are distortive, albeit in different ways. So what we ought to strive for is a mode of discourse that will allow us, while living within a given schema, to take

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Taylor, “Connolly, Foucault, and Truth,” *Political Theory* 13 (Aug. 1985), 383.

a critical distance from it, make ourselves aware of how distortive it is, the price we constantly pay in adopting it.<sup>35</sup>

Does Foucault cause us to lose any such schema through which to acquire critical distance? Taylor is working from a long tradition of thinkers – it seems intuitive that there are good and right ways through which we can bring ourselves to less biased, more complex understandings of the world around us. This is the usually stated goal of liberation, and the liberation of such subjugated knowledges and groups. These knowledges and groups are not ‘liberated’ in an effort to institute a new dominative field of knowledge that subjugates other knowledges; liberation seeks to free knowledge from the overbearing effects of a certain dominative power. Taylor wants to know: can Foucault even allow us to “move to a higher and fuller schema that will bring some hitherto smothered voices to speech, without suppressing some that we now can hear? Or does all liberation involve fresh incarceration, so that we can only move from one equally bad regime to another – or better perhaps, between regimes that are incommensurably bad?”<sup>36</sup>

Taylor finds Foucault incoherent and self-defeating; he is essentially charging that Foucault’s work doesn’t leave us any better off than where it found us in terms of developing a theory of knowledge. Richard Rorty, another Foucault scholar, accuses Foucault of failing to establish a theory of knowledge *at all*, whether or not he actually purported to create one (Rorty feels that he did). Rorty places great weight on the Nietzschean character of Foucault’s work to emphasize this point: “The Nietzschean wants to *abandon* the striving for objectivity and the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 378.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 379.

intuition that Truth is One, not to redescribe or ground it.”<sup>37</sup> Historical investigation, Rorty thinks, can be only useful to an extent in the creation of a theory of knowledge; at some point such investigation must be informed by other principles:

As far as I can see, all he [Foucault] has to offer are brilliant redescrptions of the past, supplemented by helpful hints on how to avoid being trapped by old historiographical assumptions. These hints consist largely in saying: do not look for progress or meaning in history; do not see the history of a given activity, of any segment of culture, as the development of rationality or of freedom; do not use any philosophical vocabulary to characterize the essence of such activity or the goal it serves; do not assume that the way this activity is presently conducted gives any clue to the goals it served in the past. Such purely negative maxims neither spring from a theory nor constitute a method.<sup>38</sup>

Rorty does not conclude that there is no worth in Foucault’s work – just that it cannot be established on its own merits as a theory of knowledge. But Rorty also feels that if Foucault is right, the restrictions on theories of knowledge and histories of human thought constitute an “unpleasant possibility.” “[i]f we once could feel the force of the claim that our present discursive practices were given neither by God, nor by intuition of essence nor by the cunning of reason, but *only* by chance, then we would have a culture which lacked not only a theory of knowledge, not only a sense of progress, but any source of what Nietzsche called ‘metaphysical comfort’.”<sup>39</sup>

Rorty and Taylor are only two of Foucault’s most vocal critics, but their criticisms and others of the same sort help illuminate the kinds of general problems that philosophers have in attributing to Foucault a theory of anything at all, regardless of whether or not he can faithfully be supported as having a theory of epistemology. I see three important critiques and qualms with

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<sup>37</sup> Richard Rorty, “Foucault and Epistemology,” in *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Couzens (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 46.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

Foucault arising from his theory of power-knowledge that need be answered before investigating what kind of epistemologist Foucault might be.

1. Knowledge and power are the same thing; the exercise of either is merely the exercise of both. To have knowledge, therefore, and comparably, to hold truth, is really only to hold power.
2. Foucault's concept of power-knowledge gives us no way to achieve progress in theory or truth – we can only, apparently, move from one regime of power to another regime of power without any method for which to judge them, or to judge the “truth” about them.
3. Foucault's conception of power-knowledge renders his own texts illegitimate - we have no reason for accepting them as more valid than others. They additionally do not offer themselves as a legitimate basis for a theory – not only is the ‘theory’ possibly internally contradictory, but might render an understanding of knowledge as “worthless.”

These critiques are all worthy of addressing, and their answers have great implications for epistemology and Foucault's work. There is certainly an initial shock to Foucault's assertions about knowledge and truth; one might say, that understanding knowledge and truth as Foucault does isn't understanding either at all; it is denying their existence. What is in question is the epistemic status of Foucault's own geneologies, and the principles he tries to draw out of them. And, at the heart of these concerns, is the final question: does Foucault have anything

worthwhile at all to contribute to epistemology, or is he attempting to discredit the discipline altogether?

Foucault's genealogies are, by his own admission, no more "universally legitimate" than others, at least not in relation to some objective criterion that would supervene legitimacy onto them. Foucault does, however feel that they are more correct and valid than the descriptions he is attempting to recast, but only are such within a given temporal context. I will defend Foucault against these criticisms in order, and attempt to show that he does not deny the difference between knowledge and power, the ability, for thought and theory to achieve progress, nor that his own work lacks recognizable or persuasive grounds on which we can accept them.

#### 1. Knowledge as Reducible to Power

Foucault is not trying to reduce power or knowledge to the other – they are not the same phenomenon. In *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, he says: "Relations of power are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relations), but are imminent in the latter; they are the immediate effects of the divisions, inequalities, and disequilibriums which occur in the latter, and conversely they are internal conditions of these differentiations."<sup>40</sup> Power and knowledge, while not reducible to one another, are always accompanied by one another. As Rouse argues, "Foucault is thus not identifying knowledge and power, but he is recognizing that the strategic alignments that constitute each contain many of the same elements and relations. Indeed, their

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<sup>40</sup> See note 4, at 94.



alignment as relationships of power is part of the makeup of an epistemic field, and vice versa. *How* knowledge and power come together is historically specific and may vary significantly in different domains.”<sup>41</sup>

Rouse reminds us initially of the importance of the purpose of genealogy, as Foucault sees it. Foucault thinks that genealogy “. . . should be seen as a kind of attempt to emancipate historical knowledges from subjection [to the hierarchical order of power associated with science], to render them, that is, capable of opposition and of struggle against the coercion of a theoretical, unitary, formal, and scientific discourse.”<sup>42</sup> Rouse’s first defense of Foucault’s theory of power-knowledge is to point out that criticisms such as those of Rorty and Taylor may in fact rely themselves on the notion of sovereign power that Foucault is critiquing. Rouse’s point is this: even claiming that Foucault is ultimately drawn into a position that relativizes knowledge, or collapses knowledge into power, is a type of claim that is made from a seemingly privileged position, which Foucault clearly and explicitly avoids. “Foucault’s critics take attempted rejection of the problematic of sovereignty to reduce to some position within that problematic, which suggests that they cannot (yet) conceive what power or knowledge without sovereignty could mean.”<sup>43</sup>

Rouse defends Foucault by understanding his conception of power, as well as of knowledge, as “dynamic.” Implicit to his understanding of power is the fact that power is not possessed by a certain individual and exercised upon others, as we have seen – in conjunction, power gains its strategic nature not by its exercise by those who possess it, but in that power “swarms” through all agents involved – it is distributed by nature of the relations it inhabits. In

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<sup>41</sup> See note 13, at 111.

<sup>42</sup> See note 15, at 85.

<sup>43</sup> See note 13, at 105.

this way dominant individuals are involved just as much as “peripheral agents.” “[t]he actions of peripheral agents in these networks are often what establish or enforce the connections between what a dominant agent does and the fulfillment or frustration of a subordinate agent’s desires.”<sup>44</sup> Power is also “circulating”, which is another property of power that follows from its non-possessiveness. It is produced perpetually, in one instance and then reconstituted in the next, and in this manner power relations are formed. “Power can thus never be simply present, as one action forcibly constraining or modifying another. Its constitution as a *power* relation depends upon its reenactment or reproduction over time as a sustained power *relationship*.”<sup>45</sup>

Power relationships are not “sovereign” in nature, as has been discussed. In *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, Foucault describes power in the following way:

It seems to me that power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies. Power’s condition of possibility, or in any case the viewpoint which permits one to understand its exercise, even in its more “peripheral” effects, and which also makes it possible to use its mechanisms as a grid of intelligibility of the social order, must not be sought in the primary existence of a central point, in a unique source of sovereignty from which secondary and descendent forms would emanate; it is the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power, but the latter are always local and unstable.<sup>46</sup>

Foucault’s description of power as a “moving substrate of force relations” embodies these points; power relations group together to form strategy, chains and systems, and which often

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>46</sup> See note 4, at 92-93.

result in certain forms of social hegemonies. This understanding in turn makes resistance to power relations and social hegemonies intelligible; resistance is ever-present in power relations because resistance is part of what constitutes those relations: “[p]ower is not co-constituted by those who support and resist it. It is not a system of domination that imposes its rules upon all those it governs, because any such rule is always at issue in ongoing struggles.”<sup>47</sup> Rouse summarizes his understanding of Foucault’s “dynamic” power: “. . . power is dispersed across complicated and heterogeneous social networks marked by ongoing struggle.”<sup>48</sup>

Rouse concludes by describing Foucault’s account of knowledge as dynamic in that it requires more than truth or falsity - while we usually refer to knowledge as having to do with the truth and falsity of statements, for a statement to be counted as knowledge, much more is needed. “Only in the ways it is used, and thereby increasingly connected to other elements over time, does it become (and remain) epistemically significant.”<sup>49</sup> Epistemically significant status also brings resistance and conflicts, which eventually spur further investigations into objects of knowledge and knowledge itself. In this way, “[c]onflict thus becomes the locus for the continuing development and reorganization of knowledge.”<sup>50</sup>

Foucault never tried to equate power and knowledge, or describe them as the same phenomenon. Criticizing him for ultimately having to do so is indicative of a preconceived, sovereign notion of power on which the critique is made. To argue that power and knowledge must ultimately be [erroneously] equated in Foucault’s work requires the assumption that there is some standpoint, or incident of knowledge, that is free from power relationships; but this is not an argument that Rorty and Taylor attempt to make. Rather, they criticize Foucault’s conception

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<sup>47</sup> See note 13, at 109.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

of knowledge based on their perceived undesirability of the consequences of Foucault's thought. Without an argument against the validity of his conclusions, their perceived worth is not a compelling reason by itself to reject Foucault. Foucault rejects the notion that knowledge operates apart from relationships of power through careful genealogies, and is better situated than his critics to speak of how truth and power have historically operated.

## 2. The Nature of Progress

One of Foucault's most visible attacks on the typical Western notion of progress can be found in *Discipline and Punish*. The normal narrative about the shifts in the nature and methods of punishment is that punishment and its principles became more humane – that the philosophy behind them gained a new and enlightened ethical basis. Foucault details how one of the principle justifications and reasons behind torture was the nature of how crime was perceived- it was a direct attack on the body of the sovereign (often a king), and this crime was corrected through a reciprocal spectacle of punishment upon the body of the criminal. The reformers of the punishment system, it is supposed, moved from seeing punishment in this way to seeing crime as an attack on the social contract of a society. As Dreyfus and Rabinow explain, "Crime became not an attack on the body of the sovereign but a breach of contract in which the society as a whole was the victim . . . Punishment, accordingly, must be modulated, made more lenient, for it is not only the criminal who is implicated in each of his actions, but the whole of society. Hence the limit of punishment – and its target – is the humanity of each subject."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> See note 12, at 148.

The shift in the object of punishment coincided with a shift of truth about law-breakers – this new form of punishment involved the production of new truths. Not only did it result in new theories about people who break laws, but actually resulted in the production of something called “the criminal,” about which entire sciences eventually appeared to study and explain it. The birth of the social sciences, particularly psychology, was the way in which new truths about the soul and “humanity” of persons was acquired and produced. Foucault’s genealogy, however, does not paint such a rosy picture – while the end result of reforms might have been more humane methods, the transformation to the prison system also had distinct strategic causes. First, the fear that was supposed to have been aroused in viewers of the spectacle began to result in feelings of camaraderie with the criminal; second, while reformers did advocate a more humane approach to punishment, their motives were also guided by the newfound necessity of new types of efficient punishment for crimes of smaller magnitudes that began to become more common. This need and desire for new “humane” methods of punishment, therefore, also involved the restructuring of a regime of power around new methods of collecting knowledge about persons, understanding that information, and exercising surveillance over them. The spectacular-ness of torture and public execution could not effectively serve authorities in dealing with new types of common crime such as theft, and a new regime of power, supported by new types of knowledge, was born. Foucault says: “[i]t became necessary to get rid of the old economy of the power to punish . . . It became necessary to define a strategy and technique of punishment in which an economy of continuity and permanence would replace that of expenditure and excess.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> See note 20, at 87.

This is only one example of a story told by Foucault that disrupts the more serene and morality-driven nature we like to think that progress has taken in the history of the world, from the end of torture to the rise of democratic government. Foucault is effectively reminding us that because power is always present in relations, and because knowledge is always accompanied by power relations, that the shift from this to that regime of power, or the advent of new truths and types of knowledge, are not as “pure” as we normally like to think of them. The discounting of the repressive hypothesis, for example, derails the idea that after the Victorian Age sexuality was “liberated” from control, and a time when sexuality was supposedly purposefully repressed. When oppression is defeated, isn’t power defeated? Can’t we move from one regime of power to a regime of governance or control that is not negative, that is not oppressive?

These types of sentiments are once again symptomatic of misunderstanding Foucault’s conception of the analytics of power as that of sovereign power. Surely, there are types of regimes and social matrices of force relations that are more oppressive than others; but this is not because power relations exist in less-oppressive regimes to a lesser extent. That they are localized and deployed in different and more oppressive ways does not speak to their continued presence regardless of this fact. The problem here is the natural tendency to require of truth that it be devoid of power completely. Truth, however, in Foucault’s understanding, is “of this world” – it is produced and it has effects. The necessary consequence of Foucault’s conception of power-knowledge is that knowledges and regimes of force relations, although seemingly liberated from older oppressive forces and currently non-oppressive, are not therefore free of power. They are free of oppression, and perhaps have a low amount of corresponding resistances, but power relations remain. Domination, it must be understood, is neither the crux nor the essence of power.

Rorty and Taylor, according to Rouse, are victims of this type of thinking: they “. . . depend upon crucial disjunctions: either a critique of power in the name of legitimacy, or an acceptance that power makes right; either the validation of one’s claims from a standpoint of science/epistemic sovereignty, or an acceptance that all claims to truth are of equivalent standing.”<sup>53</sup> Because of the preoccupation with the *presence* of power, neither Rorty nor Taylor are able to divorce themselves from the concept of sovereign power.

Foucault does not deny or destroy the concept of progress, or theory’s ability to achieve progress – he does recast the notion of progress. As in the first major criticism that I dispelled, the perceived undesirability of his resulting propositions about how “progress” really operates does not in itself de-legitimize the validity of Foucault’s arguments about its actual operation. Foucault is not trying to unmask some kind of world and history that is more “actual,” and that has actually, despite popular belief, been dominative and archaic in all of its stages, despite the change that societies and discourses have gone through. He is redescribing particular instances of “progress” through the lens of also understanding them as effects of power relations. In his essay “Truth and Juridical Forms,” Foucault describes his project through a response to the Marxist notion of ideology – traditional Marxism views ideology as a “negative element” that obscures the subject’s actual relation to the truth: “[i]deology is the mark, the stigma of these political or economic conditions of existence on a subject of knowledge who rightfully should be open to truth.”<sup>54</sup> Foucault, however, is not focused on how the removal of certain ideologies will liberate the knowing subject and better situate him or her in relation to truth: “[w]hat I intend to show in these lectures is how, in actual fact, the political and economic conditions of existence are not a veil or an obstacle for the subject of knowledge but the means by which subjects of

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<sup>53</sup> See note 13, at 111.

<sup>54</sup> Michel Foucault, “Truth and Juridical Forms,” in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1994), 15.

knowledge are formed, and hence are truth relations. There cannot be particular types of subjects of knowledge, orders of truth, or domains of knowledge except on the basis of political conditions that are the very ground on which the subject, the domains of knowledge, and the relations with truth are formed.”<sup>55</sup> The notion of progress, attached with the necessary condition that the political realities of power and ideology be eradicated from relations of truth, is contrary to Foucault’s work, and impossible according to his propositions about truth and knowledge. Power relations do not obscure or limit the progress of a subject of knowledge; they constitute it.

### 3. Foucault’s Own Dubious Truth

The status of Foucault’s work as a genealogist is perhaps the most vexing of these common criticisms – not only should we be worried about whether or not we can take Foucault’s work as somewhat superior or more legitimate than that which he critiques and re-describes, but if his genealogies are in fact the correct way to go about understanding power-knowledge relations, how can one be judged comparatively over another? In “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” Foucault gives the following definition of the genealogy’s purpose and method:

Genealogy must record the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality; it must seek them in the most unpromising places, in what we tend to feel is without history – in sentiments, love, conscience, instincts; it must be sensitive to their recurrence, not in order to isolate the gradual curve of their evolution, but to isolate the different scenes where they engaged in different roles.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), page??



Genealogy is not easy, and it is not per say theoretical- it will give pictures of the world that we didn't expect, and may give some we didn't want in the first place. How, if we are to accept what Foucault has to say about power-knowledge, can we give the genealogy and Foucault's own specific work a privileged truth-value status? If we can understand Foucault as a kind of epistemologist, and as having to say something about useful theories of knowledge, what basis does he have for legitimizing his own technique and conception in the face of opposition? Does not the tie of power relations in all such theories and discourses render truth relative?

Ladelle McWhorter discusses this seemingly perplexing quandary in her book *Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization*. The important point in realizing that power-knowledge does not cause Foucault to become a relativist is that "truth" is not ordinarily how real world conflicts and knowledge are decided and constituted: more often, justification is the important criterion for understanding how knowledge operates. If truth is to be 'truth' as we usually understand it, it has to be a description of an "extra-linguistic" world. If truth does not relate to such a world, then there is seemingly no criterion within the linguistic world of accurately judging which descriptions are and are not actually true.<sup>57</sup> And perhaps making justification the crux of the matter in epistemology does no better; after all, "[j]ustification, most people would hold, *indicates* truth; it doesn't create it. But, if every proposition is, as Foucault claims, just an interpretation of an interpretation, if we don't actually make claims about an extralinguistic world, then the truth-value of any given proposition must come not from its correspondence with such a world but rather from the place it occupies in relation to other propositions."<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ladelle McWhorter *Bodies & Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 44.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

Todd May in his book *Beyond Genealogy and Epistemology* offers a comprehensive look into Foucault's work, the genealogy, and its relation to epistemology. May focuses on justification as the basis for knowledge under Foucault's understanding, and for this reason, argues that Foucault does not face the same requirements as traditional analytic philosophy: "[a]ll he must show us – but he must show us this – is that his analyses can be justified, that we have reason to take them as true pending further inquiry."<sup>59</sup> In his reply to Taylor, William Connolly also defends Foucault on the basis of the nature of his project, the genealogy: "[g]enealogy is not a claim to truth . . . it exercises a claim upon the self that unsettles the urge to give hegemony to the will to truth."<sup>60</sup> The sweeping general theories about things like knowledge that are perhaps lacking in Foucault's work are partly due to the difference between theory and genealogy – genealogy does not attempt to give explanations for phenomena, or at least not definitional ones. As Connolly puts it, "Genealogy, not explanation."<sup>61</sup>

Ladelle McWhorter describes genealogy as ". . . a critical redescription of a dominant description."<sup>62</sup> The status of Foucault's redesignations are not that they are more true than their objects; not only is that an assertion that may be impossible to prove given Foucault's power-knowledge model, but something Foucault himself would deny. Neither can we necessarily hold on to principles of progress in redescription, for Foucault is also calling into question the nature of description in the first place – it is always redescription. "There is nothing behind or beneath them that is not itself an interpretation; there is no nonlinguistic origin to which we could return to check the accuracy of our accounts."<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> See note 30, at 72.

<sup>60</sup> William E. Connolly, "Taylor, Foucault, and Otherness," *Political Theory* 13 (Aug. 1985), 368.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 370.

<sup>62</sup> See note 57, at 43.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

Foucault is not talking about universal truth when he discusses truth in his genealogies, and this is vitally important to understand how to situate his work. McWhorter reminds us that “Foucault can avoid saying anything about the true meaning of truth, because universal truth at the genealogical level is simply irrelevant. Foucault doesn’t need to attend to the foundationalist question of truth at all. He only has to show that his genealogical stories are better justified than those histories. And he typically does that very well.”<sup>64</sup> The nature of Foucault’s genealogies are important to keep in mind – he is not genealogizing truth or knowledge in total, but specific case studies of convergences of power and knowledge relations that are uniquely visible in history. Attributing a foundational understanding of truth to Foucault is question-begging.

Foucault can, therefore, be in a position to say that his genealogies are more justified than other accounts; and this lends support for claiming justification for the analytics of power as a *working, justified, proposition* to understand other relations of power and knowledge. This may not be the answer that critics like Rorty and Taylor are looking for; but Foucault cannot be judged in this sense based on conceptions of truth that he does not accept. Peter Dews highlights the seeming contradiction that Foucault is faced with: “. . . if Foucault is claiming truth for his historical theories, while at the same time insisting on an immanent connection between truth and power, he can only be claiming recognition for the particular system of power with which his own discourse is bound up.”<sup>65</sup> Foucault is not claiming truth for his work *outside of a* particular system of power; but then again, such a claim of truth is impossible according to Foucault. That his work is *justified* is a claim to be made, if not by Foucault himself, then on his behalf. While refraining from claiming truth for his own work, Foucault also recognizes the

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., at 49.

<sup>65</sup> Peter Dews *Logics of Disintegration: Post-Structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory* (New York: Verso, 1987), 215.

possible future dangerousness of his work, as he continues to operate within a particular system of power.

### III. New Directions: The Implications of Power/Knowledge and the Genealogy on Modern Methods of Epistemology

#### A. Epistemology and Genealogy

Todd May's work *Between Genealogy and Epistemology: Psychology, Politics, and Knowledge in the Thought of Michel Foucault* is perhaps the most extensive attempt to date to locate Foucault's work in modern analytic epistemology. May's first focus is the genealogy, and locating the genealogy epistemologically. The genealogy is, May, feels, doing something like epistemology; it is casting a kind of skepticism on traditional theories of epistemology such as foundationalism, and denying the very terms they employ. May writes,

The genealogical writings are skeptical, but not in a traditional epistemological or logical sense. They do not display the incoherence of foundationalist thought by proving an internal conceptual contradiction, but instead show that the terms in which epistemology has cast itself are politically charged from the outset. In doing so, they implicate foundationalism in a network of power relationships that, by both denying its ahistorical status and belying its claims to innocence, gives pause to those who would accept its project in the terms in which it presents itself.<sup>66</sup>

Foucault's purported rejection of foundationalism is not surprising; he has recast epistemic terms as things "of this world," as objects that have been constituted by power

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<sup>66</sup> See note 30, at 59.

relations in history. He certainly does this most clearly with the concept of truth, which I will return to later in a discussion of subjugated knowledges. The genealogy is an epistemic activity because it seeks to correct knowledge; it corrects errors that knowledge makes when they become hegemonic. The facts and evidence that are passed over when knowledge becomes hegemonic does not mean that, at some point, all knowledge is at some point impossible; it means “that knowledge is one of the stakes in the struggle by various struggles for domination.”<sup>67</sup> A specific piece of knowledge is the end product of struggle, and often of violence within and between discourses. May describes genealogy as a weapon, “. . . pointed at transcendence and at anything that feeds upon transcendence: origin, constituting subjectivity, a priori knowledge.”<sup>68</sup>

Foucault’s critique of knowledge is problematic, because he rarely explicitly discusses the epistemic status of his own work. Foucault does not, in actuality, have “truths” to draw upon in situating his epistemology; he rejects transcendence as something that can ground his work. Foundationalism requires that, at some point, a claim be justified by a statement that does not require another statement to justify itself. May rejects foundationalism on the basis of Foucault’s work because knowledge has some of the following properties: it is not a matter of a relationship to certainty, or to the “Real”, but has to do with being able to give *reasons* to justify one’s beliefs. Justification is the real crux of the matter for knowledge under Foucault’s understanding: “Truth, as we have defined it, is a matter of ‘the way things are.’ As such, it has very little to do with knowledge, which is a matter of giving reasons. What knowledge seeks, of course, is truth (political motivations aside). But what serves to justify knowledge is not truth

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 77.

but claims that are taken to be true, either of the purposes of argument or beyond a specific argument itself.”<sup>69</sup>

Operational truth is reducible to justification; we take certain statements within certain discourses to be true because of their levels of justification within that discourse, and according to the rules of that discourse. May calls genealogy a “radical political empirics”<sup>70</sup> because of its attempts to free concepts from their supposed transcendental origins; one of Foucault’s greatest contributions that May sees is his illustration of the historical creativeness of epistemology. By showing that concepts such as ‘sexuality’ or ‘punishment’ have histories themselves, he frees them from their supposed transcendental origins and divorces them from foundational truth.

What is even more important to the nature of the genealogy, and what normative aspects it has for epistemology, is what the genealogy claims once it is completed – it does not claim truth, and certainly not transcendental truth. It offers the tools, based on historical facts, to call regimes of truth and power into question; knowledge is not automatically suspect *because* of the genealogy, although certain bodies of knowledge may be called into suspicion as a result of it. May says the success, or rather the justification (and continuing justification) of a particular genealogy “is in part dependent on the historical success – i.e., the epistemic justifiability – of the genealogy.”<sup>71</sup> Foucault’s genealogies ultimately, May feels, has a lesson to be learned about the limits of human knowledge. Foucault’s answer to his critics’ charge that he is unable to transcendently ground his work is really to not answer at all. May thinks that genealogy is

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 101.

really “. . . a therapy . . . [it] does not help us find the foundations for our thought, but instead helps cure us of the temptation to keep looking.”<sup>72</sup>

Genealogy also has an interesting possible answer to the problem of skepticism; the kind of universal doubting that occurs in the skeptical challenge, which many hold to be the first and most important epistemological question, is not necessarily compelling. The genealogy cannot engage in the kind of universal doubting characteristic of skepticism because it has to hold some knowledge as not suspect in order to operate: “[t]his does not mean that genealogy is immune to critique; the categories genealogy holds constant in any of its analyses can always be put up for investigation by another history in an attempt to show that it was not power but something else that was at work. What it does mean, though, is that criticism is always situated; one does not criticize something except in the name of something else to which one gives one’s assent.”<sup>73</sup> Skepticism, especially radical skepticism, has nothing to say when it has nothing transcendent to refer to (the supposed impossibility of certainty, etc.) and the type of knowledge it is usually employed to deny is denied itself.

In May’s work, therefore, we can see several important aspects of Foucault’s work that must be included into any epistemological prescriptions that might be made on his behalf. Foucault’s contributions to epistemology will hinge on his ability to give compelling, justified descriptions of how knowledge has operated in tandem with power in history. This is all that Foucault can claim for his own work, but it will also become important for how we understand the role of the epistemologist in the final major part of this paper, in determining the appropriate claims that epistemologists and epistemology should make for their work.

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 113.

## B. Coherentism and “Strategic” Epistemology

Linda Martin Alcoff attempts to locate Foucault’s work epistemologically in a coherentist account, a theory of knowledge that is “imminent,” as opposed to foundationalism, which is a “transcendental account” of knowledge. Coherentism is “imminent” because it has to do primarily with justification; as a characteristic of beliefs, justification only has to do with the relationship between beliefs, and not a relationship between a belief’s characteristics and any kind of transcendental property of truth. Foucault’s development of the concept of discursive formations in the *Archaeology of Knowledge* is the basis of Alcoff’s contention; she interprets Foucault’s concept of discursive formations, and the “styles of reasoning” that accompany them as “historically contingent.” The purpose of doing a history of truth, and Foucault’s purpose, is “. . . to understand how our criteria for knowledge evolved, to come to recognize their contingency, and thus to be freed from dogmatic attachments to our own discursive or belief-generating formations.”<sup>74</sup> Alcoff goes even further in describing Foucault’s project – the goal is not only to free us from dogmatic attachments, but to “create conditions whereby a different epistemological project might emerge.”<sup>75</sup>

How does Foucault’s concept of the discursive formation render a coherentist reading of his work? Alcoff’s reading of the *Archaeology of Knowledge* renders a conception of discourses that posit certain rules on statements that effect their truth-values, and primarily the possibility that they can have truth-values. For a statement to have meaning, it must first be able to be coherently stated in a discourse – if it is not coherently stated within a discourse, it falls outside

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<sup>74</sup> Linda Alcoff *Real Knowing: New Versions of the Coherence Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 119.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.



and is meaningless: “[t]he possibility of having a truth-value and identifiable procedures for determining truth-value refers once again to the necessity of having relations of a specified sort with other elements of a discourse.”<sup>76</sup> Alcoff notes Foucault’s serious break with analytic epistemology: “[i]nstead of relating statements within a discourse through their psychological causality or their grammatical or logical connections, Foucault claims they ‘are linked at the statement level.’”<sup>77</sup>

Truth is therefore an internal property of particular discourses, and constrained and shaped by the interrelationship between statements within discourse. The central characteristic of knowledge is therefore justification, and justification is determined through evaluating the interrelationships between statements. Alcoff posits three conditions of belief that render justification within the coherentist account that she attributes to Foucault: a statement must be able to have a possible truth value as a coherent part of a discourse, it must refer to an existent and identifiable object within a discourse, and it must conform to the principles determined by the discourse by which “a legitimate perspective for the agent of knowledge” is identified and defined. Alcoff thus determines that Foucault’s account of knowledge is structurally coherentist, and that it can make important contributions to coherentism: “[t]he relevant point here is that objects of knowledge emerge from a totality of practices, and thus from the whole set of diverse relations that is the focus of his account of discourses. This view represents a coherentist ontology of truth in that the criterion and the definition of truth refer us ultimately to the configuration of relations between elements, be them discursive only or discursive and nondiscursive.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 135.

This characterization has yet to explore any normative aspects of Foucault's account of knowledge, however. Inasmuch as Foucault's account provides tools for coherentist descriptions of knowledge, it does not offer any normative tools for discerning truth-values within a discourse. Regardless of whether truth-values must be determined through the interrelationship of statements and the rules within a particular discourse, Foucault does not wish to try to normatively codify correct criterion. What he has to say about the characteristics and internal qualities of discourse and discursive elements, Alcoff feels, is a coherentist description of how knowledge actually operates in a given discourse or society. Certain rules are established for entrance into an intelligible body of knowledge, and any possible truth-value of a statement or discourse is contingent upon these rules. If coherentism is characteristic of Foucault's description of knowledge, it is so because of Foucault's *historical* description of knowledge; Alcoff makes two points about the historical aspect of Foucault's epistemology. First, Foucault's discussion of truth is grounded in truth's history, that is, the history of its different methods and manners of appropriation. But a history of truth for Foucault also has an additional purpose: a history of the present. This also relates back to the purpose of the genealogy; its purpose is both to ". . . disabuse his readers of their attachment to transcendent epistemological formulations and to create the conditions whereby a different epistemological project might emerge."<sup>79</sup>

Alcoff argues that Foucault has contributions to make in epistemology outside of the question of skepticism, most particularly in understanding epistemic terms, understanding the difference between knowledge and true belief, and understanding and recognizing the limits of human knowledge.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 120.

Foucault has, as Alcoff recognizes, done much to add to the understanding of epistemic terms, like knowledge, truth, 'knower,' etc. His new understandings of these terms, however, almost completely throws traditional epistemology on its head. "Truth" is no longer a quality that corresponds to the "Real"; there is no objective referent to its distinction. Knowledge is not necessarily a universal composition for which rules are objectively applied in all circumstances; there is no one set of rules, and 'knowledge' like 'truth' is neither a quality or a category that corresponds to the "Real." Foucault gives the following descriptions of truth, something whose possibility or existence he was often charged with denying.

Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regimes of truth, its "general policies" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.<sup>80</sup>

... and ...

"Truth" is to be understood as a system of ordered propositions for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements. "Truth" is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it.<sup>81</sup>

Foucault is precisely interested in understanding how certain regimes of truth have reached the purported legitimacy of "science"; how have they gained hegemony? But Foucault's genealogy has us suspend questions of what we usually have in mind when we think of truth; the genealogy suspends the correspondence theory of truth to analyze how "truth" actually operates in discourse and society. As Alcoff puts it, "... he is also advancing his own understanding of

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<sup>80</sup> See note 1, at 131.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 133.

what, in ‘reality,’ this thing we call truth actually *is*. It is internal to our world, rather than a relation between it and a transcendental realm or a world-in-itself. Its defining criterion is historically variable and relative to different societies. And, in all of its differing manifestations, it is intrinsically political . . .”<sup>82</sup> This characterization is perhaps misleading, however. Foucault is not interested in re-characterizing the ‘reality’ which truth corresponds to as an internal property of discourse as opposed to some extra-linguistic or extra-discursive property. “Truth” is not the subject of the genealogy, but how “truth” has functioned and intersected with relations of power within discourses and societies.

Alcoff also poses an interesting question regarding what contributions Foucault makes to developing a theory of knowledge that goes beyond “true belief,” a requirement of knowledge that almost all modern epistemologists espouse. In discussing whether Foucault’s power/knowledge model is merely a description or involves a normative aspect, Alcoff discusses the difference between epistemology and a sociology of knowledge: “. . . epistemology seeks not only to *describe* how knowledge is produced but to *justify* it, and specifically to justify certain justificatory practices over others, ideal or actual.”<sup>83</sup> Are Foucault’s genealogies anything other than sociologies of knowledge, are they only able to describe how things like “knowledge” and “truth” have historically operated in discourse and society?

Alcoff’s description of Foucault’s account of knowledge as coherentist is, as McWhorter describes it, a “reinterpretation of a reinterpretation”: describing Foucault as a coherentist is really *redescribing his own description* of how knowledge and power have tended to operate in history (which he has discovered by his own redescriptions – the genealogies). Foucault would violently resist the category of coherentism for two important reasons. First, it seems doubtful

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<sup>82</sup> See note 74, at 146.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

that Foucault believed that there was an inherent or necessary way that knowledge and power operated, and would continue to operate, in the world and in history. Second, and more importantly, Foucault would never have normatively advocated coherency as a criterion for judging knowledge. While Foucault did not go the other route and assert truth-correspondence through a foundationalist theory, he would neither advocate coherence as an acceptable *normative* goal of knowledge, or of epistemology. Coherence is not a value or quality of a set of beliefs that is necessarily free from the danger of totalitarian and violent regimes of truth and power. Coherence, Foucault would argue, is a property of knowledge that is very susceptible to the normalizing effects of regimes of power and truth: reference to ‘coherence’ is what decisions about what does count as knowledge and what doesn’t are often based upon. Reference to ‘coherence’ can exclude knowledges and methods of analysis as ‘incoherent’; and because of power/knowledge, an analysis of this process is incomplete without investigating the power relations that accompany it. If knowledge really is a matter of justification, as both May and Alcoff assert, even the *criteria by which* statements, positions, and bodies of knowledge are ‘justified’ can change as their accompanying relations of power change. The position that knowledges *should be* justified ‘if they cohere’ is a step further than Foucault goes. If knowledge has operated under a coherentist theory in history through events such as the history of sexuality or the penal system, this is neither indicative of a normative quality of Foucault’s theory, nor of an assertion about an ‘essence’ of knowledge (that is, a position about how knowledge *essentially* or *necessarily* operates).

These are limits of Foucault’s descriptions, not his prescriptions. Alcoff argues that Foucault contributes to epistemology *normatively* in two important ways: he moves epistemology and philosophy away from “subject-centered procedures of justification” and

moves epistemology away from attempts to cast justificatory processes and strategies as “ahistorical.” But Alcoff is also interested in how Foucault adds to the project of “the improved epistemic status of thought,”<sup>84</sup> referring to the only normative criteria that Foucault openly advocates: the insurrection of “subjugated knowledges.”

### C. Subjugated Knowledges and Foucault’s Normative Epistemology

Linda Alcoff asserts that “[t]he only evaluative criterion that Foucault endorses is one based on whether a knowledge claim supports or disrupts the dominant discourse’s drive for hegemony.”<sup>85</sup> For Foucault, epistemology as theory should have as its goal the development of tools that allow subjugated knowledges to become resurrected, or to surface for the first time.

The role for theory today seems to me to be just this: not to formulate the global systematic theory which holds everything in place, but to analyze the specificity of mechanisms of power, to locate the connections and extensions, to build little by little a strategic knowledge... The notion of theory as a toolkit means: 1) the theory to be constructed is not a system but an instrument, a logic of the specificity of power relations and the struggles around them, 2) that this investigation can only be carried out step by step on the basis of reflection (which will necessarily be historical in some of its aspects) on given situations.<sup>86</sup>

This is how Foucault’s epistemology becomes normative; it is “strategic.” Foucault’s genealogies have more of a goal than the bringing to light of new information; its purpose is more than a redescription. Foucault discussed the nature of subjugated knowledges and the strategic purpose of the genealogy in a series of lectures he gave from 1975 to 1976 at the

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>86</sup> Michel Foucault, “Power and Strategies” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings From 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 145.

College of France and described it as “. . . a sort of attempt to desubjugate historical knowledges, to set them free, or in other words to enable them to oppose and struggle against the coercion of a unitary, formal, and scientific theoretical discourse.”<sup>87</sup> This does not entail a process of legitimizing these insurrected knowledges. Foucault does not mean to enable the dominance of a previously subjugated knowledge, but understands the purpose of the genealogy as providing the tools to enable such knowledges to engage in struggle. The question regarding the insurrection of subjugated knowledges is not rendering them legitimate, but revealing or discovering their potency as well-justified types of knowledge. Genealogies are therefore inherently suspicious of knowledges claiming “scientific” status: “[g]enealogies are, quite specifically, antisciences. It is not that they demand the lyrical right to be ignorant, and not that they reject knowledge, or invoke or celebrate some immediate experience that has yet to be captured by knowledge . . . They are about the insurrection of knowledges.”<sup>88</sup>

Foucault means two things when he talks about ‘subjugated knowledges.’ He is first talking about historical facts and “contents” that have been hidden, or passed over, by a hegemonic discourse that has sought to order coherent bodies of knowledge. But subjugated knowledges are also knowledges that have been *disqualified* by hegemonic discourses: “. . . naïve knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity.”<sup>89</sup> Foucault strongly believes that it is the intersection of these two types of subjugated knowledges, the hidden historical content and the disqualified knowledges, that has characterized the nature of critique since the early 1960’s.

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<sup>87</sup> See note 15, at 85.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 83-84.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 82.

Linda Alcoff recognizes several potential problems with the type of picture I've just reconstructed of the purpose and goals of Foucault's normative epistemology: most importantly, Alcoff argues that "Foucault gives no other way of evaluation than knowledge's positioning in relation to a dominance, and gives no way to distinguish between a bunch of different subjugated knowledges,"<sup>90</sup> that is, other than the question of *power*. This is the sort of objection we've seen before; but power and knowledge do not collapse to power, as we've seen. To charge Foucault with being left with power as the only evaluative criterion is perhaps understandable, especially operating under the notion of sovereign power. For some reason, evaluating knowledge claims with power automatically seems bad; it seems incomplete, and it seems to deny our usual conception of knowledge. But this is the result of Foucault's genealogies, and to charge that power is the only evaluative criterion of knowledge is question-begging. For Foucault, there are no epistemic concerns, questions, or criteria that can be separated from power relations; but this result doesn't render them non-epistemic. Alcoff agrees: "[b]ecause Foucault . . . denies that there is any knowledge, form of reasoning, or even truth free from an intrinsic, constitutive relationship with power, he is said to be unable to sustain a normative epistemic dimension." But his critics err because they ". . . conflate the claims that knowledge is never free of power and that truth is immanent to the discursive domain with a claim that power is all that is operative in the constitution of knowledge."<sup>91</sup> This is a different claim, however, than her claim that power remains the only means by which we can evaluate subjugated knowledges. Power is not some kind of inadequate evaluative criterion for knowledge, or rather knowledges; power relations are ever-present, conjoined with relations and structures of knowledge, and if one

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<sup>90</sup> See note 74, at 151.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 153-154.



accepts Foucault's genealogies, to ignore the relations of power that accompany all relations of knowledge would be irresponsible.

Foucault always held that there is something damaging about hegemonic discourses and sciences. Alcoff acknowledges that Foucault "... believes that hegemonic knowledges always have to exert a violence (in both an epistemic and a political sense) on local and particular knowledges in order to sustain them within their universal structures. Something at the local level is always distorted or omitted in order to enable the reductionist move of containment."<sup>92</sup>

Foucault describes such *totalitarian* theories and knowledges as follows:

It is not that these global theories have not provided nor continue to provide in a fairly consistent fashion useful tools for local research . . . But I believe these tools have only been provided on the condition that the theoretical unity of these [local] discourses was in some sense put in the abeyance, or at least curtailed, divided, over-thrown, caricatured, theatricalised, or what you will. In each case, the attempt to think in terms of totality has in fact proved a hindrance to research.<sup>93</sup>

Global and totalitarian theories and knowledges not only 'pass over' hidden knowledges but enact *violence* upon them. But what is the end result of a subjugated knowledge that has shed the dominance of a global knowledge? As Foucault's critics aptly point out, because he doesn't purport to free subjugated knowledges from power relations upon exposing them and disentangling them from a dominant discourse in the process of the genealogy, what worth is there in focusing upon them? If power is Foucault's only evaluative criteria and power relations do not somehow disappear when subjugated knowledges are insurrected, how can we evaluate their worth against a hegemonic knowledge which is entangled with power relations just the same?

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>93</sup> See note 15, at 80-81.

The important point to realize about ‘power’ as an evaluative criterion is that not all power relations are of the same kind; they are not all desirable or undesirable simply because of their presence in conjunction with knowledge structures. Foucault is not merely discussing knowledges that have been violently dominated by global knowledges when he discusses subjugated knowledges, but *local* knowledges in general. Linda Alcoff describes the difference: “[w]hat makes these knowledges local is not simply that they have not yet achieved dominance, but *that they do not aspire to dominance*. They do not construct competing unitary, formal, totalizing theoretical systems that seek to subsume all local elements beneath a single umbrella, but are formulated as local not just in terms of the range of their content but also in terms of their structure.”<sup>94</sup> Alcoff argues therefore that the distinction should be made between hegemony-seeking knowledges and local knowledges.<sup>95</sup> This distinction is important, for the term ‘subjugated knowledges’ might dupe Foucault’s readers into the familiar notion of liberation: that upon becoming unsubjugated, knowledges will have become liberated from power relations.

#### D. Science and Knowledge

A brief pause needs to be taken to investigate an almost immediate question about Foucault’s work: the question of science. Foucault spends a great amount of time speaking of knowledges that he calls ‘pseudo-sciences’ such as psychiatry and psychology. These are unified corpuses of knowledge that Foucault thinks are much more suspect in their generalizations than science, which we tend to associate with things such as mathematics and

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<sup>94</sup> See note 74, at 156, *italics added*.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

biology – disciplines with extremely high levels of justified truth and universally accepted conclusions. Foucault has some interesting things to say about these types of sciences in remarks in an essay entitled “On the Archaeology of the Sciences” regarding the *Archaeology of Knowledge* and *The Order of Things*, a period before he had identified power as a core part of his discussions of the discursive and non-discursive. In discussing the “analysis of discursive formations,” an analysis he would later contend was horribly incomplete without consideration of power relations, Foucault describes it as an attempt “[t]o bring into existence the dimension of knowledge as a specific dimension is not to reject the various analyses of science; it is to unfold as broadly as possible the space in which they can come to rest.”<sup>96</sup> There are some sciences whose “epistemological extrapolation” – the characteristics of their formal structures – prove to be so justified over various discourses, societies, and time itself, that they become separated from the type of manipulative and illusion-forming power relations indicative of other types of pseudo-sciences. Foucault thinks that mathematics, for example, is very much a science of this type. Foucault is not therefore trying to posit that all knowledges are as suspect as others; he is also, however, not putting forth the thesis that sciences such as mathematics are “more true” than their ‘pseudo-science’ counterparts.

Foucault is therefore generally fine with the types of formal sciences that we often think of when we think of knowledge in its highest forms. There are plenty of sciences that have separated themselves, in their form and structure, from violent power relations and structures. But this acknowledgment should be coupled with a warning as well:

There is an illusion that consists of the supposition that science is grounded in the plentitude of a concrete and lived experience; that geometry elaborates a perceived space, that biology gives form to the intimate experience of

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<sup>96</sup> Michel Foucault, “On the Archaeology of the Sciences: Response to the Epistemology Circle,” in *Michel Foucault: Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology* (New York: The New Press, 1994), 327.

life, or that political economy translates the processes of industrialization at the level of theoretical discourse; therefore, that the referent itself contains the law of the scientific object. But it is equally illusory to imagine that science is established by an act of rupture and decision, that it frees itself at one stroke from the qualitative field and from all the murmurings of the imaginary by the violence (serene or polemical) of a reason that founds itself by its own assertions – that is, that the scientific object brings itself into existences of itself in its own identity.<sup>97</sup>

Science is, as we've said, not privy or more privy to a quality of knowledge that renders it more true than others – science does not become automatically justified, it is free from “the violence of a reason that founds itself by its own assertions.” Science, in Foucault's archaeology before his work on power/knowledge, is not free from discursive formations, and is additionally not free from power relations, even though they may be less-violent and less-hegemonic than others. Foucault refers to regimes of knowledge and power that try to achieve ‘scientific status’ so much because he sees important parallels between how disciplines such as psychiatry try to structure themselves, and sciences such as biology and mathematics structure themselves. The attempt to render these pseudo-sciences as ‘scientific’ has to do with their *normalizing* operations. Dreyfus and Rabinow describe the distinction as follows: the “. . . major difference between the operation of normal science and that of normalizing technologies; whereas normal science aims in principle at the final assimilation of all anomalies, disciplinary technology works to set up and preserve an increasingly differentiated set of anomalies, which is the very way it extends its knowledge and power into wider and wider domains.”<sup>98</sup> The difference between the two, they argue, are the levels of the political: “[w]hereas normal science has turned out to be an effective means of accumulating knowledge about the natural world (whereas knowledge means accuracy of prediction, number of different problems solved, and so on, not truths about how

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 331.

<sup>98</sup> See note 12, at 198.

things are in themselves), normalizing society has turned out to be a powerful and insidious form of domination.”<sup>99</sup>

#### IV. New Prescriptions for the Post-Genealogical Epistemological Project

##### A. The Role of the Intellectual

The outcome of the genealogy, and of Foucault’s conception of power/knowledge, has important implications for the intellectual – for our purposes, particularly the epistemologist. Foucault is clear about this new role being based in working towards the possibility of a “new politics of truth.”

The essential political problem for the intellectual is not to criticize the ideological contents supposedly linked to science, or to ensure that his own scientific practice is accompanied by a correct ideology, but that of ascertaining the possibility of constituting a new politics of truth.<sup>100</sup>

Foucault is very clear about rejecting ideology as a replacement to sovereign power and universal truth as the purpose of the intellectual and theorist. The intellectual is engaged in a battle, but not an ideological battle. The intellectual is rather charged with providing the tools for subjugated knowledges to insurrect against hegemonic knowledges and regimes of power:

The intellectual can operate and struggle at the general level of that regime of truth which is so essential to the structure and functioning of our society. There is a battle ‘for truth’, or at least ‘around truth’ . . .<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> See note 1, at 133.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 132.

And just as the intellectual cannot step back and separate himself from power relations and offer insights that are “pure” and separate from them, so is the goal of the intellectual *not* to separate such subjugated knowledges from power. The task of the intellectual is to rather isolate and clarify certain knowledges that have been passed over or suppressed in history from certain forms of power relations, particularly the types of domination and totalitarian regimes of truth that have either disqualified them as knowledges, or violently suppressed them:

It’s not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power) but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at the present time.<sup>102</sup>

This task of the intellectual is a matter of critique; the intellectual seeks to problematize accepted bodies of knowledge in addition to and through a process of providing the tools for the insurrection of subjugated knowledges. An intellectual should be, I think Foucault would say, careful when empowering subjugated knowledges with tools of resistance to not *turn them into* the type of hegemonic-seeking knowledges that Linda Alcoff distinguished and warned about. Foucault’s understanding of the role of the intellectual is political, one must agree, but it is also focused on the type of historical inquiries such as the genealogy: using historical facts to help describe the history of the present in different ways than “conventional wisdom” would have us. The intellectual should be engaged in telling historical stories that refrain from offering universal and authoritative descriptions about what things *are*. The end pursuit of insurrection is for knowledges to become un-subjugated; not to turn them into totalitarian hegemonies of theory or power; the more ambitious goal of genealogy is to render knowledge itself *un-hegemonic*. I think Foucault must admit that the intellectual is at some level admittedly political in the kinds of

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 133.

subjugated knowledges she would choose to explore and investigate, but a genealogy requires justification based on historical fact, and the bracketing of truth. This may be the highest level of 'unbiased-ness' that the intellectual can actually achieve in the insurrection of subjugated (or local) knowledges; it is at least so for Foucault.

The type of "new intellectual" that Foucault hopes to empower is more particularly the "specific intellectual." The specific intellectual is the kind of intellectual that works around local relations of power and knowledge, as opposed to the "universal intellectual." Foucault describes the specific intellectual's role as follows:

[it] must become more and more important in proportion to the political responsibilities which he is obliged willy-nilly to accept . . . It would be a dangerous error to discount him politically in his specific relation to a local form of power, either on the grounds that this is a specialist matter which doesn't concern the masses (which is doubly wrong: they are already aware of it, and in any case implicated in it), or that the specific intellectual serves the interests of State or Capital (which is true, but at the same time shows the strategic position he occupies), or, again, on the grounds that he propogates a scientific ideology (which isn't always true, and is anyway certainly a secondary matter compared with the fundamental point: the effects proper to true discourses).<sup>103</sup>

The specific intellectual's struggle around truth is different because it has to do with a localized, specific relation of power and knowledge, as opposed to the unity and totality often claimed by certain disciplines. As David R. Shumway reconstructs his position, ". . . a discourse considered to be true at any given time is not the sum total of possible truths, but a mixture of truth and error, the structure of which is determined, not only by what is true as opposed to false, but by rules and procedures that produce some facts and some interpretations and prohibit others."<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>104</sup> David R. Shumway, "Genealogies of Knowledges," in *Critical Essays on Michel Foucault*, ed. Karlis Racevskis (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1999), 89.

Investigating these specific truths and errors at local levels presents, for Foucault, the best method by which to engage in critique and struggle around truth and hegemony.

This does not mean, however, that the specific intellectual now holds the more legitimate position to lead the masses in the “correct direction” regarding how knowledge is to be understood. As Barry Smart points out, “. . . no ‘leading role’ is attributed to intellectuals by Foucault; on the contrary, it is argued that events have shown that the masses do not lack for knowledge, the problem is that their local and popular forms of knowledge have been steadily discredited, disqualified, or rendered illegitimate by the very institutions and effects of power associated with the prevailing ‘regime of truth’ within which the modern intellectual operates.”<sup>105</sup> The specific intellectual is more properly able to struggle around truth. They function “. . . within the specific sectors at the precise points where their own conditions of life or work situate them . . .”<sup>106</sup>

## B. Subjugated *Epistemologies*

When doing epistemology, Foucault is not interested in coming up with theories which seek to ground or describe knowledge universally such as foundationalism, but also is doing more than providing us with a sociology of knowledge. Foucault advocates using intellectual investigation, such as epistemology, to free different types of subjugated knowledges that exist – and different epistemologies certainly fall within this category. We must understand the difference between an *epistemology* and a *knowledge*, for there is an important distinction to be

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<sup>105</sup> See note 2, at 165.

<sup>106</sup> See note 1, at 126.



made. Foucault's two most important genealogies regarding power/knowledge are about sexuality and punishment, and while Foucault regards the new and recast histories that he gives as constituting subjugated knowledges that have been passed over by other interpretations and knowledges (whether or not they are true), that is not to say that either of these subjugated knowledges are *epistemologies*. When we usually talk about epistemologies, we think about different methods or theories for distinguishing between knowledge and non-knowledge, truth and falsity; theories explaining how we know, what we know, and what we can and can't know. The 'knowledges' that Foucault is examining do not always themselves offer methods and theories for understanding *knowledge in general*.

An epistemology must also be more than a sociology of knowledge; recall Alcoff's characterization of the duties of epistemology: "[it] seeks not only to *describe* how knowledge is produced but to *justify* it, and specifically to justify certain justificatory practices over others, ideal or actual."<sup>107</sup> Foucault has fulfilled this requirement through the genealogy; he's denied the normal pillars of a theory of knowledge such as the universal independent 'knower' and described 'truth' as part of what is really at the crux of knowledge-justification. He has, through this denial and bracketing and use of the genealogy, relied on the historical-factual efficacy of his reinterpretations of the present and of knowledge as justification without a claim of truth correspondence, as we've seen most distinctly in Todd May's arguments. Historical facts are reasons, and Foucault recognizes that reason-giving is infused with power relations. Foucault's chosen method of justifying knowledge are processes of justification that do not appeal to sovereign notions of power or truth.

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<sup>107</sup> See note 74, at 147.

Not only does power/knowledge have implications for the descriptive/sociological level of epistemology, but also offers us normative guidelines for the insurrection of subjugated knowledges: providing them with the conceptual tools needed to combat monolithic theories, but not to help them become the kind of hegemony-seeking knowledges that they are trying to combat in the first place. A subjugated *epistemology* should neither seek hegemony, and Foucault's calls to the intellectual require that we ask several questions of any epistemology: what types of knowledge does it seek to establish as valid, and which does it seek to exclude? What types of analysis does it reject, and which does it regard as reasonable? What types of evidence may we employ, and what kinds are not good enough? And most importantly: what types of power relations accompany these decisions and realities?

Foucault's conceptions are clearly enough at tension with Descartes' view of the world, and the method by which he aspired to gain indubitable truth; the passive, individual knower using reason and purportedly certain propositions from which to deduct further truths about the world. Foucault has important things to say about how knowledge [actually] operates in the world, and the further role that theory should take; but he is not offering a complete epistemological theory of the kind that contemporary analytic philosophy does. Not only is he unwilling to call his own work and his genealogies "knowledge," but refrains from giving a system of rules or criteria for justified belief that might concretely justify his own work. Foucault's genealogies are focused on those systems of belief that already purport to be fully justified, and in widening the playing field among knowledges. Knowledge is possible if we accept Foucault, but a new thorough epistemology does not emanate from his work. As McWhorter puts it, "[w]hat counts as real may indeed be relative to contexts and produced in networks of power, but propositions within contexts can still have truth-values relative to that

context (in fact they can't have truth values outside of contexts) and can still be justifiable. In short, knowledge is still possible. Foucault is not a nihilist; he is simply an anti-foundationalist.”<sup>108</sup>

We should be looking for, therefore, the well-justified propositions about how knowledge operates, and the relations of power that it is bound up with, in Foucault's work; not the types of epistemological theories that attempt to account completely for knowledge in general. Foucault treats knowledge in the same manner as he treats truth and the subject – as an historical object for the genealogy. Foucault is interested in knowledges, and in what ways certain knowledges gain dominance and others are passed over and hidden away. Just as Foucault is interested in understanding *knowledges* instead of *knowledge*, he would be interested in *epistemologies*: investigating those ways of understanding and constituting knowledge that have been passed over and done violence to by hegemonic epistemologies.

David Shumway qualifies the goal of Foucault's genealogies: “[g]enealogy's target is not the validity of the knowledge of any particular discipline, but *the claims of particular sets of rules for determining truth to be themselves self-evident truths*.”<sup>109</sup> Shumway argues that Foucault's work should be interpreted as inspiring a new project focused on the “critical history of knowledge formations.”<sup>110</sup> This characterization of Foucault's project is intuitive, given his long record of refraining from labeling specific knowledges as good or bad. Foucault is more interested in the methods by which power and knowledge relations intercede among one another to create rules and norms by which specific bodies of knowledge will be found true or not – it is the supposed truth of these rules by which knowledges gain hegemony, and not necessarily the

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<sup>108</sup> See note 57, at 49.

<sup>109</sup> See note 104, at 86, italics added.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

specific content of a certain knowledge. It makes sense, therefore, that Foucault will be especially interested in epistemology: he is consistently more interested in *how* things are taken to be true, as opposed to whether or not they are in fact true.

Just as Foucault avoided a theory of power in pursuit of an analytics of power, and just as he avoided a theory of knowledge in pursuit of a genealogical analysis of the effects and operations of knowledge, we do not find in Foucault's work a theory of epistemology to be adopted and used: what we do find are political prescriptions for struggling against hegemonic regimes of knowledge and power. Barry Smart describes hegemony as a system and structure that "... contributes to or constitutes a form of social cohesion not through force or coercion, nor necessarily through consent, but most effectively by way of practices, techniques, and methods which infiltrate minds and bodies, cultural practices which cultivate behaviors and beliefs, tastes, desires, and needs as seemingly naturally occurring qualities and properties embodied in a psychic and physical reality (or 'truth') of the human subject."<sup>111</sup> Theories of knowledge in general, as types of theory infused with power relations, will, as other universal theories, assist this process of social cohesion through its own rules and practices. Just as theory can result in processes of normalization, so can epistemology, and for this reason Foucault cannot be read as trying to advocate a new theory of knowledge. He rather seeks to develop local criticisms of knowledge in general, and the furtherance of the ability for local and subjugated knowledges to struggle against hegemonic regimes of truth. Foucault's prescriptions for epistemology will have to do with resistance of normalizing, universal, epistemological theories in order to enable local and subjugated epistemologies to be heard.

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<sup>111</sup> See note 2, at 160.

### C. Subjugated Epistemologies – An Example

Michel Foucault and the feminist movement have had an interesting love-hate relationship. Many feel that Foucault's conception of power/knowledge, especially recasting the subject and subjectivity as an effect of relations of power through the genealogy, makes the kinds of resistance that feminism wants to engage in structurally incoherent. If subjectivity is a historical construct, how can it 'resist' in the first place? This kind of sentiment, again, is perhaps a symptom of the sovereign conception of power that Foucault has rejected, as Ladelle McWhorter describes: "[p]ower exists not only in its exercise; that is, power exists as an event, not as a thing."<sup>112</sup> McWhorter also reminds us that Foucault did not deny all forms of subjectivity as though they were empty and meaningless. Describing Foucault's position, she says, "[e]xcept insofar as I am to differing degrees at different times subjugated by the actions of others, I can exercise agency despite (and even because of) the fact that my very existence as a subject is a form of subjection."<sup>113</sup>

A complex discussion of Foucault on the subject and subjectivity isn't necessary to understand that, for not only some feminists but some members of other subjugated groups such as the gay and lesbian rights movement as well feel that Foucault isn't giving them the tools they thought they were receiving. Subjugated groups, and their subjugated knowledges, often have to do with the assertion of resistance that liberates truth from the dominative power of a hegemon that oppresses. We've seen, however, that Foucault does not see the purpose of theory or theorists to be granting subjugated knowledges tools that can free them from relations of power. He rather endorses the development of tools that allow subjugated knowledges to compete and be freed of the violence that unified, totalitarian regimes of truth and power impose upon them.

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<sup>112</sup> See note 57, at 77.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

Feminist epistemology is an awkward phrase, as many have pointed out – shouldn't epistemology *just be epistemology*, a theory about knowledge that applies universally without regard to things like gender? What does gender have to do with truth or knowledge? Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter explain the predicament as follows, referring to the phrase "feminist epistemology": "[f]eminist theorists have used the term variously to refer to women's 'ways of knowing,' 'women's experience,' or simply 'women's knowledge,' all of which are alien to the professional philosophers and to epistemology 'proper' – that is, alien to a theory of *knowledge in general*."<sup>114</sup> Feminist epistemology is not about knowledge in general, but is a "subaltern knowledge"<sup>115</sup> which is concerned about the "social context and status of knowers,"<sup>116</sup> in particular for feminist epistemology, what the status of the gender of the knower within a certain social context has upon knowledge. Feminists often point to the nature of the supposed universal knower within epistemology, in particular, as an example of the androcentric nature of epistemology and of science. Helen Longino describes this position as the belief that ". . . the activities of ruling-class men produce a knowledge of the world characterized by abstractness and impersonality, that their own politically structured freedom from the requirements of re/producing the necessities of life is reflected in the kind of understanding they produce of the social and natural world."<sup>117</sup> Descartes' passive knower, doubting and seeking to use reason to achieve certainty, is an example of this feminist sentiment – that the type of project that we usually think of when we do epistemology does have a male gender bias. Some feminists argue that this kind of approach to thinking about epistemology overlooks the woman's ". . .

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<sup>114</sup> Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, "Introduction: When Feminisms Intersect Epistemology," in *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (New York: Routledge, 1993), 1.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> Helen E. Longino, "Subjects, Power, and Knowledge: Description and Prescription in Feminist Philosophies of Science," in *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (New York: Routledge, 1993), 106.

characteristic activity and relation to the means of production/reproduction” which produces an understanding that is able to “incorporate men’s perspectives as well as their own and hence to develop a more accurate, more objective, set of beliefs about the world.”<sup>118</sup>

The correct path for feminist thinkers to take, according to Gail Stenstad (whose work I earlier discussed in relation to the normalizing effects of theory), is to abandon traditional theoretical thinking and to embrace “anarchic thinking:”

We need to do much more than confront patriarchal thinking in its own terms and by its own rules. We also need to think in ways that deliberately break the rules, ways that deny to patriarchy the right to set a standard for feminist thinking. Why should we, in our resistance to patriarchy and our attempt to create something different from it, continue to echo some of its most fundamental presuppositions (that there is a truth, a reality, the good, etc.)? One of the most subversive things feminists can do is to think anarchically and then to speak and act from this thinking. Anarchic, unruly, thinking is atheoretical thinking: that is, it is thinking that does not work from, posit, or yield objective distance, supra-historical truth, hierarchical orderings, or a unitary reality.<sup>119</sup>

Feminist thinking, in being anarchical, seeks to approach topics such as epistemology with methodology that need not cohere to accepted practices of methodology, for as we’ve seen, the types of accepted methodology behind theory can often be a tool of a hegemonic regime of power and knowledge. Anarchic thinking is a type of critique that seeks other avenues of motivation for explaining the strange, and the familiar: “[t]heory-building seeks, in a sense, to make the strange familiar, to tame it and place it in its proper slot in the totality. Anarchic thinking, on the other hand, takes note of the previously unnoticed or unheeded strangeness in what is familiar.”<sup>120</sup> This is precisely that results of Foucault’s “histories/genealogies of the present.” This approach resists the totalizing and normalizing effects of theory in an effort to not

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> See note 17, at 332-333.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 334.

only offer redescriptions that resist hegemonic methodologies, but seeks to problematize hegemonic knowledge in an effort to unmask the tensions underneath dominant theories and descriptions.

Lynn Hankinson Nelson offers an interesting understanding of feminist epistemology by first offering propositions for how knowledge actually operates in the world (which is not to be confused with advancing a general theory of knowledge). She places epistemological priority on communities as a working proposition: “the collaborators, the consensus achievers, and, in more general terms, the agents who generate knowledge are communities and subcommunities, not individuals.”<sup>121</sup> This doesn’t mean that Nelson is denying the individual knower and the activity of knowing for an individual: “My claim is that the knowing we do as individuals is derivative, that your knowing or mine depends on *our* knowing, for some ‘we.’”<sup>122</sup> Nelson’s claims about epistemological communities is a basis for her characterization of the kind of epistemology that feminist epistemology is, but the proposition itself has very strong Foucaultian undertones: epistemological communities are not indicative of the forms of knowledge or truth, but construct knowledge, and develop its standards and constraints. She describes epistemological communities as dynamic in the same kind of ways that Rouse described power and knowledge as dynamic:

Not only are such communities and their parameters dynamic, but there is no simple criterion for determining their boundaries. Where we recognize such parameters will be a function of the nature of our projects and purposes (e.g., in doing epistemology or in forming academic subcommunities, political action groups, or a neighborhood group to deal with local issues); of the definitions communities give to themselves and the projects they undertake; and of the importance such communities (or those engaged in epistemology or other projects) attribute to the standards and knowledge they share with larger groups

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<sup>121</sup> Lynn Hankinson Nelson, “Epistemological Communities, in *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (New York: Routledge, 1993), 124.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*



and those they do not – decisions which will also be relative to specific purposes and interests.<sup>123</sup>

These are all the sorts of relations that Foucault has looked at before in the development of knowledges: how they are related to relations of power, such as the purpose behind knowledges, the types of definitions and structures that knowledges give to themselves in order to legitimize themselves, and whether or not a knowledge seeks to assert universality or not. Within this understanding of how communities which construct knowledge are delineated, Nelson sees feminist epistemology as entering into the fray in the following way:

. . . feminist communities . . . [are] communities whose political goals have led, among other things, to the rethinking of the categories and assumptions of the academic disciplines (including philosophy) and sciences, and to the development of categories and ontologies, theories, and methodologies that are enabling us to uncover women's experiences and to reconstruct and reevaluate the experiences of men and women.<sup>124</sup>

Feminist epistemology emerges from an epistemological community with political goals that seek to transform how knowledge is conceived of, but also how it is *practiced*: the methodologies by which it is understood. This is especially important for feminist epistemology, which, as the process by which a subjugated knowledge might be insurrected, has to do with how epistemic terms are defined, the trajectory of epistemic arguments, and other concerns having to do with the methodology of epistemology. Helen Longino, a pre-eminent epistemologist and feminist epistemologist, describes several ways in which the feminist perspective changes the epistemological project. There are, for instance, discrepancies between the worth of feminine testimonies in certain fields of knowledge as compared to masculine testimonies – that is,

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

differences in the levels of “cognitive authority” that men and women hold. Longino argues that the feminist perspective is a type of situatedness of epistemology: “[t]he situatedness of subjects means there is no place of transcendence, of unsituatedness for which epistemic privilege can be claimed.”<sup>125</sup> But Longino also criticizes feminist epistemologies which seek to reverse the situatedness of women into one of epistemic privilege, recognizing that “[f]eminist standpoint theory seeks to reverse the assignment and grants epistemic privilege to those in subordinated, socially unprivileged positions.”<sup>126</sup> Longino does not want the result of feminist epistemology to be the assertion of the constant necessity for gendercentric theory in epistemology. Rather than assert the more valid legitimacy of the feminist standpoint in theories of knowledge, Longino hopes to change the visible factors in the *context* in which epistemological claims occur; feminist epistemologies help to uncover hidden assumptions within traditional epistemology and provide the tools by which feminists can assert their own contributions to knowledge theories. As Longino says, “[u]ntil challenged by those female-centered alternative models, androcentric assumptions were invisible as assumptions. As long as they were shared in the culture and especially in the culture of those pursuing physical anthropology research, there was no challenge to them and they simply formed the consensual background against which other issues could be seen as contentious.”<sup>127</sup>

Feminist epistemology is (or rather, can be) a kind of insurrected subjugated knowledge that seeks to combat hegemonic epistemologies that hides or invalidates its importance as a contributor to legitimate thought. Along with Foucault, Longino and Nelson argue that feminist epistemology is meant not to shift the feminist perspective and political agenda into the preferred

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<sup>125</sup> Helen E. Longino, “Feminist Epistemology,” in *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, ed. John Greco and Ernest Sosa (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2002), 338.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 334.

or legitimate epistemic standpoint, but to change the understanding of “local background assumptions” to incorporate certain social values and categories.

Feminist epistemology is a good example of a subjugated epistemology whose insurrection by epistemologists has attempted to free the feminist standpoint from marginalization in epistemology, expose the supposed hidden androcentric assumptions of the methodology of epistemology, and, we mustn't forget, provide the tools by which feminists might achieve certain political goals. To remain consistent with Foucault's understanding of the insurrection of subjugated knowledges, knowledges should not be themselves hegemony-seeking, which is why an epistemology like feminist epistemology should not have as its goal a replacement in legitimate standpoint, or a universalizing of epistemology as gender-centric. This qualification is crucial for any type of subjugated knowledge upon which the specific intellectual operates around; the end goal should not be hegemony seeking theory that seeks itself to achieve a new type of normalization in epistemology, but the rendering of subjugated epistemologies as able to visibly struggle against their own marginalization (which itself is a result of types of normalization). Its goals should be to supply feminists with the tools they need to compete with dominant epistemologies that may or may not be ridden with androcentric assumptions that hide or do violence to feminist dimensions, and whose ultimate consequence is not the liberation of women and the preeminence of feminist epistemology, but the changes in *epistemic contexts* that allow feminist epistemology to be unmasked and free from domination. If this type of feminist epistemology is successful, it will be successful in creating new kinds and categories of epistemological communities, who themselves can be characterized by political goals, and that are able to construct new types of knowledge about the world and about theory in general.

## V. Conclusion

David Shumway explains Foucault's uneasy treatment as an epistemologist as indicative of the common impulse to ". . . translate him into familiar terms . . . Perhaps the reason that more don't recognize the lack of a fit between their terms and Foucault's is that the system of academic disciplines rewards such misrecognition. A written work about Foucault is not likely to be published anywhere but in an academic journal or book, which are governed by the rules of particular disciplines. There is as yet no organized discipline that takes historically existing knowledges as its object."<sup>128</sup> While I have attempted to apply Foucault's work to epistemology itself and its normative prescriptions, Foucault's work remains resistant to categorization as epistemology. His contributions may be described *within* epistemology, but they do not *constitute* an epistemology.

I have attempted to show in this paper that Foucault does not deny the possibility of the objects of inquiry that epistemology focuses on, but recasts these objects in compelling and radical ways that are consistent with the method of his project. Understanding knowledge and power relations as always operating together not only alters the way in which they are understood and therefore studied, but also exposes their political historical operations. The danger of knowledge is that it can become hegemonic, universal, and totalizing, and that the normalizing effects of such a regime of truth can do violence to local knowledges and local regimes of power that become disqualified by the very rules, terms, and methods by which such hegemonic regimes constitute their own legitimacy. This understanding gives the specific intellectual, and furthermore the epistemologist, the charge to resist such results, and to instead

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<sup>128</sup> See note 104, at 85.

advance thought “around truth” at local levels, and at levels where local knowledges are subjugated, in order to displace hegemonic regimes of knowledge and power.

Foucault would advocate, as I have attempted to show, the “specific epistemologist” and the insurrection of subjugated epistemologies as the correct prescription for the struggle against hegemony. Just as Foucault refuses to claim a theory of power or of knowledge in his work, so does he see theory as a common method by which hegemonic regimes of power and truth exercise control and violence over local knowledges through the effects of normalization. What does not emanate from Foucault’s work is the advocacy of a particular type of epistemology or theory that is “more true” than another; what does emanate is an explicit recognition of the manner in which epistemology should focus its efforts in order to be *better* (“better” understood as, to degrees, more free from dominating and violent regimes of knowledge and power that normalize what we count to be true and not true, as well as what we count as knowledge). The end result of the struggle around local and/or subjugated epistemologies should not be new, more true theories or descriptions, but less violently dominated ones.

The Foucaultian specific epistemologist is therefore charged to use genealogy to provide the tools by which subjugated epistemologies, whose knowledges, experiences, and evidence are often rendered unqualified, can struggle against hegemonic regimes of knowledge, while resisting the creation of new theoretical means that might cause such a knowledge to seek hegemony by attempting its own normalization of knowledge and truth. Among such subjugated knowledges and epistemologies, feminist epistemology is only one, but is an excellent example of how a local epistemology can attempt to overstep its bounds and replace that knowledge or theory which it seeks to displace.

Foucault's epistemological prescriptions are admittedly political, because the specific epistemologist will always occupy a certain place within a local configuration of power. But Foucault's redescription of how knowledge actually operates helps us understand that this situatedness is not tainting or obscuring, but is a well-justified reality. As a politically-situated intellectual, the specific epistemologist can struggle around truth while avoiding the normalizing consequences of universal and totalistic theories. A thorough understanding of Foucault's genealogies, and his resulting understanding of the relations between power and knowledge, shows that such an understanding coheres not only to Foucault's stated normative conclusions about theory, critical thought, and the project of the intellectual, but with the implications of understanding and observing knowledge and truth as "things of this world."

*I pledge that I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance during the completion of this work.*

*Respectfully Submitted,*

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Martin Allen Hewett". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

*Martin Allen Hewett*

*March 22, 2004*