

Critique as Therapy: Reflections on Foucault and Derrida

Kurt Borg

Perhaps one of the most crucial philosophical questions to ask is “what is philosophy?” But, perhaps too, the possibility of asking that question points towards the fragmented nature of the enterprise. Through the shadows of Foucault and Derrida, I will try to show how this question is important since it continually expands the definition of philosophy, blurring its territorial boundaries in such a way that enables an otherwise-thought world, preventing philosophy from being another disciplinary regime. Since antiquity, philosophy’s reliance on a notion of truth provided it with analytical leverage. Hence, by placing the currency of truth itself under scrutiny, it is claimed that thinkers like Foucault and Derrida risk undermining philosophical inquiry *tout court*, reducing philosophy to rhetoric or fiction, with no critical function whatsoever. What’s more, because of this, no normative grounding can be extrapolated from their ideas, no emancipatory aim can be sought and no ethical framework can be pursued. Both Foucault and Derrida were often criticized along these lines (Habermas, 1987).

Through these two figures, however, one can conceive of philosophy as an activity concerning a critical engagement with society and culture on one hand, and an engagement with oneself on the other. With Foucault and Derrida, the stakes of theoretical inquiry can barely be any higher since thought becomes a risky activity: to think is to risk yourself in the process, to risk unfamiliarising the familiar. Radicalising the experience of

thrownness in the world, Foucault and Derrida insist that philosophy is not about solutions and resolutions. Concepts – our elements of thought – are shown to have an uncanny nature, able to play, entail ambivalent meanings and resist univocity. History is shown to be potentially malleable, to tell us incomplete and distorted stories, to contribute to our forgetting. Truth is shown to be less and less stable, exclusionary, non-neutral, ignoble. Reason is shown to be stifling, contingent, impatient. Freedom is shown to be provisional, conditional, illusory. We are shown to be effects, dominated, non-transparent... unimportant.

Yet where does this leave us? Are we able to respond to this? Are we response-able? Irrespective of our stopping and thinking about it, politics goes on: laws are implemented and enforced, discrimination and domination persist, violence is a daily reality, injustices are ongoing. No matter what, ethics must go on: decisions are made, emotions are lived, conversations happen. Faced with thrownness into meaning, into a social reality, into a history, into mortality, any philosophy is a situated philosophy. Indeed, philosophy is the poly-situation within and upon which the philosopher operates.

This characterisation can help us to proceed in thinking of philosophy as critique and as therapy. The intersection between the two concepts can be seen when, for example, what one is called becomes an issue, when what one is called does not square up with what one experiences, that is, when categorising becomes painful, when seeking intelligibility becomes violence. Through employing a critical apparatus with which to analyse this imposition, one is also

exposing oneself. Exposing in the sense of revealing and affirming but, paradoxically, also of making susceptible to loss. One can strive to get rid of the burden of being misrecognised, but here one also faces the weight of weightlessness: revealing the contingencies of shackled identities does not only amount to emancipation, but also to the impossibility of being socially unidentifiable.

This is where the conception of philosophy as therapy comes useful. Damaged by the carried shackles and scarred by the vulnerability of being exposed, one turns to philosophy to suture, structure and reconfigure oneself. This is not done by appealing to an extra-discursive or extra-existential realm. There are, of course, limits to language, to the thinkable and the liveable, but all these limits can be pushed, redefined, renegotiated. Not at whim or at ease, but through commitment and risk.

Foucault's characterisation of philosophy as a critical activity of thought bearing upon itself brings out this dual role of philosophy as critique and therapy. One's self is at the intersection since by critically engaging with power and social relations, with the ways in which life in society is organised, and the ways in which one consents to or is disconcerted by the manner in which identities are managed, one is reflecting on and possibly surpassing normalised ways of being and of relating to others. Does this amount to a categorical refusal and scepticism in the present, in whatever is widely considered a human achievement? Perhaps not. But it is a distrust in the pretension that one's knowledge can ever be complete or finalised, and that knowledge of oneself and of others is possible. This does not amount to an uncritical search for novelty or

radicalism but of embracing an other without knowing it, without seeking to love it on the basis of being able to give an account of it.

In a Nietzschean manner, this approach implies a life-affirming yes-saying which is not blind with pretension of certainty. Although imbued with hesitance, it is an approach which embodies the courage to stand fast and withstand the fear of not knowing how to live, to affirm an identity which is recognisable but which is never conclusive. Through one's conduct, one steps forward and risks exposing oneself. This risk is not a blind and unconditional faith in one's thought but demands a constant revision of one's conceptual tools. As Foucault writes, philosophy is an activity which implicates its doer by transforming the philosopher's conduct and thought:

[What] would be the value of the passion for knowledge if it resulted only in a certain amount of knowledgeableness and not, in one way or another and to the extent possible, in the knower's straying afield of himself? (Foucault, 1992, p. 8)

In this manner, Foucault conceived of philosophy as an *askesis*. This does not amount to an asceticism of self-renunciation or abstention, but is a self-forming activity, a risky engagement with truth, and a way of practising critique without the stable and reassuring grounds of truth and tradition (Foucault, 1997). But why refuse these grounds? What motivates this hesitance to acknowledge the merits of a history that has, arguably, fuelled so much human progress? Both Foucault and Derrida were concerned that supplanting and enabling this logic of progress and increasing clarity is a silencing and exclusion of sorts. The bright light of

Enlightenment reason is like a sharp blade violently tearing its way through the undecidable paths of language and history. Both Foucault and Derrida call out the inevitable violence underlying the dominant ways of doing philosophy and ethics embedded in truth (Foucault, 2001; Derrida, 2001).

Through their reconfigurations of ethics, Foucault and Derrida shed further (inevitably violent) light on ethics, understood as the self's relation to itself and the self's relation to the other. By sustaining an ethos where things are to be assimilated before respected and accepted, or where things are to be identified as familiar before considered as meaningful, one risks reproducing the violence inherent even in the noblest of truths. This is because what potentially doesn't fit within our deeply cherished and hardened frameworks of truth aren't just mathematical propositions, but individuals or groups of people. This doesn't mean that abandoning the regimes and currencies of truth automatically amounts to the disappearance of exclusion and suffering, but that we should be ever-wary of the presupposition and pretension that increasing knowledge and its right implementation is equal to decreasing suffering. Perhaps we need to accept that a significant deal of suffering, hatred and exclusion may be fuelled by the unquestioned and unsuspected will for intelligibility.

Surely, it is not a matter of doing away with discourses and conceptual frameworks, be they medical, legal, ethical and political notions such as well-being, rights, freedom and duty. The question concerns the grip, the cling with which we hold on to them in clear sight of the suffering and torment they constitute and contribute to.

The philosophical approaches of Foucault and Derrida contribute to an attitude of complicating the activity of creating and utilising concepts by foregrounding their malleable nature and the danger these potentially entail in daily practices. The ethics and politics of concepts might be a suitable way of characterising the ideas of Foucault and Derrida.

One could also say that their projects consist in a reverse Cartesianism of sorts. If Descartes proceeded from a destructive uncertainty to a stable certainty, Foucault and Derrida gnaw into an unstable certainty posing as an indispensable necessity, releasing a productive and necessary uncertainty. Here, one cannot but recall the ample criticism directed towards Foucault and Derrida – not without often lack of honest engagement with their works – who regard the two as rejoicing in the destruction of truth and as acclaimers of an amoral transgression with no ethical sensibility. But here one must look deeper into, say, Foucault’s philosophical engagement with the courage of truth-telling (*parrhesia*) in his final lectures (2012) to gain insight into the sensibility involved both in the content of his work and into the attitude towards work. Faced with imminent death, continuous illness and physical pain, one can appreciate Foucault’s work ethic – his engagement with classical texts, his commenting on philosophical *askesis*, his thoughts on thinking and living otherwise, on courageously being truthful and approaching death; and, too, of continuously recharacterising his own philosophical projects over the years and finding new lines of continuity, of being open to surprising oneself and to submit the comfort with which one understands oneself to critique. Foucault (2000), after all, didn’t shy away from being for an ethic of

discomfort. A similar assessment can be made of Derrida's philosophical approach. After being diagnosed with a terminal illness, he too maintained an admirable philosophical ethos, as can be seen, amongst other sources, in an interview highlighting his lack of knowledge on how to personally deal with death, or in his ever-open dialogue with a figure generally seen as lying on a different philosophical wavelength – Jürgen Habermas (Derrida, 2007; Habermas & Derrida, 2003).

Even if associated with so much controversy and polemical engagements with their work and with each other's work, the figures of Foucault and Derrida continue to contribute to philosophy not so much through forming strong allegiances with their spectres but with the challenge they left behind them – the challenge of embracing and embodying the difficulty of their ethics; an ethics associated with *critique*, constant revision of one's conceptual apparatuses and the open-endedness, unfixity and undecidability of one's conclusions. Beyond lack of concern and sensibility, the works of Foucault and Derrida entail a radical understanding (amidst its incomprehensibility and unassumability) of responsibility, both towards oneself and towards the other. Alongside their critical understanding of philosophy, one mustn't neglect their *therapeutic* understanding of philosophy, which includes the ways through which one deals with oneself and others, as well as recognising the ailments of one's thoughts. It is a therapy which, however, excludes the potential of an attainable cure or salvation. Perhaps this is a philosophy that challenges our impatience to rashly confuse the cure with its lure. It is a therapy

which accepts limits and, especially, their malleability and their inability to bind.

∞ **References**

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