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ARTICLE

Situation, Meaning, and Improvisation: An Aesthetics of Existence in Dewey and Foucault

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ABSTRACT: This essay explores important intersections between the thought of John Dewey and Michel Foucault, with special attention to the distinction between emancipation versus “practices of freedom.” The complex relationship between these thinkers is, at once, complementary, divergent, and overlapping. The author however stresses the way in which both Dewey and Foucault portray situated subjects as improvisational actors implicated in unique situations, the meaning of which turns on the extemporaneous exertions of these implicated agents.

Keywords: Pragmatism, experimentation, situation, meaning, emancipation versus practices of freedom, intelligence, suspicion.

Introduction

Richard Rorty provocatively asserts that, “James and Dewey were not only waiting at the end of the dialectical road which analytic philosophy traveled, but are waiting at the end of the road which, for example, Foucault and Deleuze are currently traveling.”¹ Limiting our attention solely to the thinker about whom this journal is devoted, I am disposed to respond that Rorty either read too much James and Dewey into Foucault or too little of these pragmatists.²

¹ Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), xvii. In addition to Rorty, Richard J. Bernstein and Cornel West have, from the perspective of pragmatism, engaged the work of Foucault. See Bernstein’s *The New Constellation: Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992) and West’s *American Evasion of Philosophy* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press). In “American Evasions of Foucault,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 36, 3 (Fall 1998), 329-351, I have offered a critique of the way both Rorty and West’s engagements are—as much as anything else—evasions of Foucault’s challenge to pragmatism.

² It is not my intent to bash Richard Rorty. I feel deep admiration for the person and no slight sympathy with his project. Given my own interpretation of the pragmatists, criticism is however unavoidable. In his “Comments on Sleeper and Edel,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 21, 1 (Winter 1985), Rorty noted: “I should begin by confessing that I am out of my depth in addressing this audience. Not only the people here with me on the platform, but practically everyone in this room has read more James and Dewey than I have, and read them more recently.” “My excuse for invoking their names despite being relatively unlearned in their works is,” Rorty added, “as follows. For some years, whenever I thought I had found something general and useful to say, it sounded like an echo of something I had once read. When I tried to run it

Even so he was prescient in seeing affinities between Dewey and Foucault, however much his claim regarding priority is exaggerated and his appreciation of differences blunted. Dewey was not awaiting Foucault at the end of any path forged by this incomparable experimentalist.³ Though Dewey did anticipate Foucault in a number of respects, Foucault's work should be read *by pragmatists* as a development of but also a deviation from some of the directions in Dewey's thought. This being said, the paths of these thinkers did in effect cross each other time and again; moreover, they did so at decisive junctures—critical points.⁴ Finally, the junc-

down, I was constantly led back to Dewey. When I had read Dewey as a student, I had not greatly admired him, though I *had* greatly admired James." (39) From then and until his death, Rorty read more of the pragmatists, especially Dewey. Even so, he was never engaged in offering a selfless exegesis, but rather always offering a "strong misreading" of American pragmatism (see, e.g., Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 150-52). He makes no pretence of doing anything else. See, however, John E. Smith's *America's Philosophical Vision* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 5-13. Smith is right to insist that: "Everyone is at liberty to express philosophical views of his or her own, but if someone does this via the invoking of the views of others—Kant, Hegel, the Pragmatists as a body or Dewey in particular—that person incurs the obligation to express these other views as accurately as possible and not merely to enlist their support for notions of his or her own." (6) In his most recent book, *The Pragmatic Turn* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2010), Richard J. Bernstein in effect levels some of the criticisms against his lifelong friend and philosophical ally that I am disposed to press. See in particular Chapters 6 ("Experience After the Linguistic Turn") and 9 ("Richard Rorty's Deep Humanism.")

³ In an interview, Foucault insisted: "I am an experimenter and not a theorist. ...I'm an experimenter in the sense that I write in order to change myself and in order not to think the same as before" (Foucault, *Essential Writings*, 3, 241). This text (one to which I will return in the body of this paper) is likely to remind readers of a famous passage in R. W. Emerson's "Circles" in which he announced: "But lest I should mislead any when I have my own head and obey my whims, let me remind the reader that I am only an experimenter. Do not set the least value on what I do, or the least discredit on what I do not, as if I pretended to settle any thing as true or false [once and for all]. I unsettle all things. No facts are to me sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker with no Past at my back." Emerson, "Circles" in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays*, edited by Larzer Ziff (NY: Penguin, 1982), 236. The middle term here is Nietzsche, who was influenced by Emerson and who in turn influenced Foucault (so much so that Foucault was disposed to proclaim "I am a Nietzschean.")

⁴ One of the most important of these is the refusal to suppose that norms and ideals are rooted in something other than historical affairs and empirical actualities. See especially the concluding chapter of Dewey's *Human Nature and Conduct* ("Morality Is Social.") All references to this work are to volume 14 of the *Middle Works of John Dewey*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 1988). Here Dewey stresses, "the social forces effective in shaping actual morality work blindly and unsatisfactorily." (MW 14, 220) Foucault no less than Dewey worked tirelessly to make the operations of these forces more visible, for the sake of reconstructing or transforming the *ethos* of everyday life. Hence we find both thinkers working against some of the specific ways in which social forces minutely shape our actual morality. Dewey goes so far as to identify morals with learning: "In the largest sense of the word, morals is education. It is learning the meaning of what we are about and employing that meaning in action." (MW 14, 195) This implies to a surprising degree that we do not know the meaning of what we are about. This in return implies that (in Foucault's words) we must think the unthought; and we must do so, again and again. The task of thinking the unthought is interminable. It is moreover one facet of what Foucault identifies as the practice of freedom. In light of such considerations, we are warranted in asserting that Dewey no less than Foucault is an oppositional thinker, an intellectual whose projects draw their energy and point from their opposition to the specific ways in which social forces operate all too blindly and unsatisfactorily. There are, Dewey insists,

tures at which their paths intersect can now be taken as invitations to take an alternative route (to deviate from the familiar road), by treading that blazed by the other thinker. Deweyans might profit immensely from turning onto paths blazed by Foucault and his followers, just as Foucaultians might benefit from exploring routes forged by Dewey and his kin.

One way to show this is to explore how the project of each thinker is bound up with what Foucault identifies as the practice of freedom.⁵ Indeed, their projects are, from their own perspectives, instances of such a practice. Each practiced philosophy in the name of freedom, that is, for concrete realization of the irreducibly plural forms of self-overcoming.⁶ To miss this, is to miss the center of each author's vision.⁷ To catch this, is to have obtained a vantage point, from which the unique character of their ultimately divergent projects come into sharp focus. It is, however, also to be in a position to discern, despite numerous and deep differences, their deepest kinship. Discerning this kinship is not necessarily as delineating these differences. Whether one stresses kinship or difference, the decisive question is a pragmatic one: 'What is the purpose of undertaking such a venture?' From the perspective of each thinker, the only convincing answer is that such an exploration holds the promise of illuminating how we might appropriate these insights into the practice of freedom. "Every oracle," as Emerson insisted in a different context, "must be interpreted by the same spirit that gave it forth." So too must simply every author. The spirit, in which both Dewey and Foucault wrote, is that the antecedent conditions are (at best) resources for transforming the historical present. Meanings are most valuable when providing the means for articulating in a more arresting and (somewhat paradoxically) more mobile form—meanings are in the making. In some respects, we need to be stopped in our tracks; our impulses to repeat the autho-

"enormous differences of better and worse in the quality of what is social. Ideal morals begins with the perception of these differences." (MW 14, 225) The birth of morality—in the sense Dewey and Foucault are concerned with morality—is the discernment of difference and, on the basis of such discernment, a politics of opposition. If one asks "In whose judgment are such forces acting blindly and unsatisfactorily?" the most immediate and compelling answer is, those who are expressing outrage or at least dissatisfaction.

⁵ This is only one way among various other possibilities. Pluralism is indeed central to how both Dewey and Foucault understand the practice of freedom. This concerns the task undertaken in this essay: it is self-consciously imagined to be far from the only way of undertaking this venture. For Foucault's understanding of the expression providing the basis of our exploration, see, e.g., "The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom." (Foucault, *Essential Works* 1, 281-301) The practice of freedom is subsequent to the attainment of liberation or emancipation in the strict sense (see especially 282-83). Given his historical and cultural circumstances, Foucault stresses the practice of freedom over the task of liberation or emancipation. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (New York: New American Library, 1987), one of the main characters says: "Freeing yourself [from slavery] was one thing, claiming ownership of that freed self was another." (95) Freeing oneself from slavery would be a case of liberation or emancipation in the strict sense, while claiming ownership of that freed self would be one way of characterizing the practice of freedom in Foucault's sense. Whether or not characterizing this practice in terms of ownership ("claiming ownership of that freed self") is the most felicitous one available is, from Foucault's perspective, contestable; but the passage from Morrison's novel nonetheless helps us to draw this pivotal distinction.

⁶ This is the answer to the question posed and indeed pressed by Bernstein in *The New Constellation* – In the name of what is Foucault offering his critique?

⁷ "Any author," William James suggests in *A Pluralistic Universe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), "is easy if you can catch the center of his vision." (44)

ritative utterance or invoke an established authority must be arrested. In other respects, however, congealed meanings must be liquefied—frozen meanings should be melted.⁸ In other words, the promise of possibilities inscribed in the writings of Dewey and Foucault are thus sounded anew, for the sake of facilitating our own engagement in practices of freedom. If this promise is—in some measure—fulfilled here, the venture will have been worthwhile.

Situated Subjects and Mutable Situations

“The real difficulty is,” Dewey contends, “that the individual is regarded as *given*, something already there.”⁹ Whatever counts as an individual, is historically situated. While nothing seems easier than abstracting recognizable individuals from the situations in and through which they exhibit their unique recognizability, nothing is more dangerous. Abstracting them from these situations, fosters the illusion that such individuals are related to these situations only in an external and adventitious manner. Whatever else they are, human agents are situated beings whose modes of expression, striving, and reflexivity are inescapable functions of their historical situatedness.

Historical subjects in the Foucaultian sense—historically constituted and constituting subjects¹⁰—are never anything less than situated agents. Despite the expression “the death of the subject,” the decentering of the subject (the theoretical turn to which this dramatic expression refers), this does not entail the annihilation of the subject, much less the effacement of agency. In response to an observation in which the interviewer (Alessandro Rivière) suggests that Foucault appears, much like such “liberals” as Friedrich von Hayek and Richard von Mises, Foucault is in fact taking “a detour in order to rediscover the individual beyond the mechanisms of power.” Foucault insists upon the need to draw a distinction. The point of this is to deny that there is any individual beyond the mechanisms of power, while simultaneously affirming that subjects are not so enmeshed in regimes and thus relations of power as to lack the ability to resist refashioning themselves. Subjects are necessarily beings of subjugation, but—and with equal necessity—sites of resistance (there being no exercise of power without the impulse toward resistance). Foucault is emphatic in his rejection of what he calls “the sovereign subject.” This is in part because appeal to the sovereign subject is (at least) in effect an appeal to an ahistoric foundation, but also in part because positing a universal form

⁸ “One sometimes encounters what may be called situations or states of domination in which the power relations, instead of being mobile [or fluid], allowing the various participants to adopt strategies modifying them, remain, blocked, frozen. When an individual or social group succeeds in blocking a field of power relations, immobilizing them and preventing any reversibility of movement by economic, political, or military means, one is faced with what may be called a state of dominance.” (Foucault, *Essential Works*, 283)

⁹ Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 1988), volume 12 of the *Middle Works of John Dewey*. Cited as MW 12. While the terms *individual*, *subject*, *self*, *person*, and a number of other words and expressions ought not to be treated as simply equivalent, the point made by Dewey regarding individuals bears a kinship to that made by Foucault regarding subjects. Dewey however does deploy the terms *subject* and *subjectivity* (see, e.g., Dewey, *Experience and Nature*); and he does so in a manner very close to that of Foucault.

¹⁰ If we read Foucault in light of Foucault—in particular, if we read the earlier writings in light of the later ones—it seems reasonable to maintain that human beings are capable of remaking in some manner and measure the histories that have made, with the help of these humans themselves, made them.

of human subjectivity erases historical differences.¹¹ Decentering the subject is the negative side in affirming the centrality of practices. Affirming this centrality does not entail annihilating subjectivity, though it does involve situating subjectivity and thereby problematizing what is to be understood by this term.¹² To deny a sovereign status or foundational role to human subjectivity does not amount to denying improvisational ingenuity or effective resistance to normalizing regimes. It is simply a militant opposition to facile generalizations and unnecessary postulations. Such opposition draws its point and power from a critical stance toward antecedently established norms and codified meanings. In the very stance of opposition, it acknowledges the actuality but not the authority of such norms—(again) the actuality but not the normativity of such meanings. Improvisational agents, even those who self-consciously devote themselves to aesthetics of existence,¹³ are situated subjects and hence subjugated beings. To appreciate that the conditions of subjection and subjugation are also those of agency and improvisation, invites—indeed demands—us to envision the work of freedom as an undertaking in history, not necessarily in any grand sense, but certainly in the critical sense of those everyday activities potentially contributing to seismic changes (e.g., a gay person kissing his lover in public).

Accordingly, the practice of freedom, as conceived by Dewey and Foucault, requires us to understand the *situated* character of human striving. The word *situation*, not only in its colloquial senses but also in a technical one,¹⁴ plays a prominent role in Dewey's mature thought. Though there is no exact counterpart in Foucault's voluminous writings, the function played by this term in Dewey's texts is discernible under various (dis)guises in Foucault's. Far more to the point, at every turn Foucault is minutely attentive to the local scene and the historical situation in which the practice of freedom became, as a result of his patient labor, a flight of thought.

The theoretical importance of focusing on situations (especially specific historical situations), however, ought not to eclipse personal acknowledgment on the part of both thinkers

¹¹ "A distinction must be made here. In the first place, I do indeed believe that there is no sovereign, founding subject—a universal form of subject to be found everywhere. I am very skeptical of this view of the subject and very hostile to it. I believe, on the contrary, that the subject is constituted through practices of subjection, or, in a more autonomous way, through practices of liberation, of liberty, as in Antiquity..." Michel Foucault, *Politics Philosophy Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, edited by Lawrence D. Kritzman (NY: Routledge, 1988), 50

¹² It is instructive to compare Foucault's response in this interview to Derrida's reply to a similar challenge. In the discussion followed his presentation of "Structure, Sign, Play and in the Discourse of the Human Sciences, in *The Structuralist Controversy*, edited by Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), Derrida claimed "The subject is absolutely indispensable. I don't destroy the subject; I situate it; That is to say, I believe that at a certain level of both experience and of philosophical and scientific discourse one cannot get along without the notion of subject. It is a question of knowing where it comes from and how it functions." (271)

¹³ See James W. Bernhauer and Michael Mahon's "The ethics of Michel Foucault" in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 155.

¹⁴ See Dewey's *Logic: A Theory of Inquiry. The Later Works of John Dewey*, volume 12 [1938], edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1991). Also Tom Burke's "What Is a Situation?" *History & Philosophy of Logic*, 21 (2000), 95-113.

that they had been shaped by circumstances. But such acknowledgment is not merely personal. It is rather tied to the practice of freedom, as envisioned by Dewey and Foucault. The experiential character of this distinctive practice is evident in the extent to which those devoted to this practice make of their own lives—hence, of the situations into which they are thrown—occasions for experimentation and opportunities for innovation. The radical experimentalist is the person whose very life is a series of experiments regarding (at least, in effect) the viability of an experimental life (a life predicated on the unblinking acknowledgment of ineradicable fallibility, one without foundations and, except in largely trivial matters, one without certainty).¹⁵ Dewey and Foucault were radical experimentalists in just this sense. They took the actual situations in which they were thrown with the utmost seriousness, not longing for a transcendent perspective from which to view their historical entanglement, but joyfully accepting the available light provided by a critical understanding of just those historical circumstances.¹⁶ In addition, they took their work to possess not only the form of experimentation, but also the character of experience. The *experience* of thinking through situations was, on the part of each author, self-consciously registered as an experience, in a sense to be clarified shortly. One might reasonably ask: ‘How could it be otherwise?’—but their emphasis on experience in this connection is anything but banal or even commonplace. It is crucial for identifying the distinctive character of their critical interventions.

In “From Absolutism to Experimentalism,” an autobiographical essay, John Dewey confessed:

Upon the whole, the forces that have influenced me have come from persons and from situations more than from books—not that I have not ...learned a great deal from philosophical writings, but that what I have learned from them has been technical in comparison with what I have been forced to thinking upon and about because of some experience in which I found myself entangled.¹⁷

To have been influenced by the *situations*, in which he was entangled, was to have been forced to think about and upon matters because of some experience in which he was implicated.¹⁸

¹⁵ According to C.S. Peirce, the lives of experimental inquirers (those of such individuals as Copernicus, Brahe, Kepler, Galileo, Harvey, and Gilbert) were, in the context of the historical emergence of experimental inquiry, experiments (“their lives were so many experiments in regard to the efficacy of the method of experimentation.”) (*Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, volume 4, edited by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1933), 4.31. In accord with the standard mode of citation, “4.31” refers to volume 4, paragraph (not page) 31.)

¹⁶ The manner of acceptance is critical. It might be begrudging or simply resigned. In contrast, it might be joyful.

¹⁷ *Later Works of John Dewey*, volume 5 (Carbondale, IL: SIU). Cited as LW 5. LW 5, 155.

¹⁸ From Dewey’s viewpoint, human beings are “not contemplatively detached” from the traits of the world into which they are thrown. These traits “involve him in his perplexities and troubles, and are the source of his joys and achievements. The situation is not indifferent to man, because it forms man as a desiring, striving, thinking, feeling creature. It is not egotism that leads man from contemplative registration of these traits to interest in managing them, to intelligence and purposive art. Interest, thinking, planning striving, consummation, and frustration are a drama enacted by these forces and conditions.” (LW 1, 67) Situated subjects are, in brief, *implicated* agents: they are implicated in the shifting scenes of their everyday lives and

This made a circuitous route of Dewey's intellectual development. He was however disposed to highlight the advantage of this: "with all of the inconveniences of the road I have been forced to travel, it has the compensatory advantage of not inducing an immunity of thought to experience—which perhaps, after all, should not be treated even by a philosophy as the germ of a disease to which he needs to develop resistance."¹⁹ To render thought impervious to the disclosures and pressures of experience is, from Dewey's perspective, a double betrayal; for it is a betrayal of thought no less than of experience.

Indeed, the task of the philosopher and other theorists ought to be that of rendering thought increasingly susceptible to the transformative power of our actual encounters, thus of enveloping circumstances (or situations). So conceived, the theoretical task is rooted in the felt need to situate oneself, more conscientiously and critically than one has accomplished to this point, in the actual historical situations in and through which one's improvisational efforts alone can generate differential effects.²⁰

The traditional ideal of transcendence gives way to a deepened sense of involvement, alongside a robust acknowledgment of finitude and immanence.²¹ From this perspective critical distance becomes an immanent achievement; that is, it is attained not by extricating ourselves from the situations in which we are implicated, but rather by fashioning modes of participation and involvement in which the illusory necessity of the institutional forms of various human practices is exposed for what it is (an *illusory* necessity). In short, such distance is a function of difference or, more precisely, differentiation (above all, the differentiation between the customary and the necessary). Such differentiations are however inscribed in the folds of the fields in which one is situated.

The apologetic function of so much sophisticated thought stands in marked contrast to this experimental function. The task of thought should dispense its anxious, all too anxious, impulse to defend what must be and, moreover, should adopt a joyful, irrepressibly expansive impulse to facilitate what might be otherwise than what has been. In short, it should become the passion to *think differently*, as a prelude to *being* otherwise.²² Thinking differently is more

their quotidian engagements have a dramatic quality (not least of all because the outcome hangs in the balance). The situations in which we are most immediately implicated are cultural and historical. In another context, Dewey thus stresses that "the primary facts of social psychology centre about collective habit, custom." Hence, "we need to find out just how different customs shape the desires, beliefs, purposes of those who are affected by them. The problem of social psychology is [hence] not how either individual or collective mind forms social groups or customs, but how different customs, established interacting arrangements, form and nurture different minds." (MW 14, 46)

¹⁹ LW 5, 156.

²⁰ Power in the most relevant sense here concerns not the capacity to impose restrictions or prohibitions, but the ability to generate difference effects (differences that truly make a difference).

²¹ Colin Koopman, "Historical Critique of Transcendental Critique in Foucault: Two Kantian Lineages" in *Foucault Studies*, No. 8 (2010), 100-121.

²² "What is thought freed itself from common sense and decided to function only in its extreme singularity? What if it adopted the disreputable bias of the paradox, instead of completely accepting its citizenship in the *doxa*? What if it conceived of difference differentially, instead of searching out the common elements underlying difference? Then difference would disappear as a general feature that leads to the generality of the concept, and it would become—a different thought, the thought of difference—a pure event," Foucault,

than a prelude to living otherwise; it is an instance of doing so, in however inchoate and precarious a manner.

Doing so is inherently dangerous. In response to this question, “Do you think the role of philosophy is to warn of the dangers of power?” Foucault responded: “This has always been an important function of philosophy. In its critical aspect—and I mean critical in the broad sense—philosophy is that which calls into question domination at every level and in every form in which it exists, whether political economic, sexual, institutional, or what have you.”²³ In this context, Foucault translates the Socratic injunction “Take care of yourself” into “Make freedom your foundation, through the mastery of yourself.”²⁴

If anything Foucault is more Deweyan than Dewey, at least in the way he describes his relation to his authorship. This is nowhere more apparent than in an interview with Duccio Trombadori in 1978.²⁵ Early in this exchange Foucault admitted: “I’m perfectly aware of always being on the move in relation both to the things I’m interested in and to what I’ve already thought.” He immediately added: “What I think is never quite the same, because *for me my books are experiences*, in a sense, that I would like to be as full as possible.”²⁶ This sense turns out to equate experience with transformation: “An experience is something that one comes out of transformed.” In this context, Foucault sharply opposes the theorist and the experimentalist. Moreover, he explicitly identifies himself with the latter:

I write a book only because I still don’t know what to think about the thing I want so much to think about, so that the book transforms me and transforms what I think. ...I am an experimenter and not a theorist. I call a theorist someone who constructs a general system either deductive or analytical, and applies it to different fields in a uniform way. That isn’t my case [i.e., that isn’t what I do]. I’m an experimenter in the sense that I write in order to change myself and in order not to think the same as before.²⁷

His books are instruments of transformation because they are designed and, in the course of their elaboration, refashioned to be nothing less. In Foucault’s own words, “however erudite my books may be, I’ve always conceived of them as direct experiences aimed at pulling myself free of myself, at preventing me from being the same.”²⁸ From Dewey’s perspective, it all comes down to “experience personally conducted and personally consummated.”²⁹ In light of Foucault’s remarks, we might say that the work of experience, so conducted and consum-

Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews, translated by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 182.

²³ Foucault, *Essential Works* 1, 300-301.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 301.

²⁵ “Interview with Michel Foucault.”, in Foucault, *Essential Works* 3, 239-97. I am indebted to Charles E. Scott for reminding me of this text, in particular, to a paper recently presented at the American Philosophies Forum (Emory University, April 2010).

²⁶ Foucault, *Essential Works* 3, 239; emphasis added.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 241.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3, 241-42.

²⁹ John Dewey, “Beliefs and Existences” in *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, volume 3, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Press, 1977), 94.

mated, is transformation, not least of all transformation of the self. Such transformation is always, in some manner and measure, a freeing, not only a freeing of the self *from* itself, but also a freeing of the self *for* what it has not yet even imagined to be possible or desirable.

Such a task is undertaken not in the abstract, but always in the concrete—in some concrete historical situation in which the possibilities of transformation are among the most deeply contested topics. To be situated means to be involved. While being situated is an inescapable condition of human beings, actual situations—especially in their unique specificity—might be embraced in a more or less self-conscious, also a more or less self-critical, manner. Critical involvement in particular situations is a conscientious insertion of one's vulnerable self in an ongoing history. In the case of Foucault the purpose—no less than that of Dewey—was to alter these situations, transforming our circumstances. "I tried to do things," Foucault noted, "that required a personal, physical, and real involvement, things that would address problems in concrete, precise, and definite terms, in a given situation."³⁰ Such involvement demanded immersion and saturation, not transcendence or distance: "One has to proceed by progressive, necessarily incomplete saturation."³¹ It is moreover thoroughly experimental: "My work takes place between unfinished abutments and anticipatory strings of dots. I like to open up a space of research, try it out, and then if it doesn't work, try again somewhere else."³² The work of opening spaces of possible research, ineluctably linked to sites of possible transformation, *is* (in its predominantly theoretical or discursive guise) the practice of freedom in Foucault's sense.

Such theoretical work is (as I have already noted) an experiential process, which unleashes transformative possibilities. Theoretical articulation and personal involvement—and, hence, direct experience—are inextricably intertwined. Part of the paradox here, is that our experience provides us with the impetus and instruments to detach ourselves from ourselves and also from specific situations, at least to the degree requisite to think, feel, and indeed become otherwise than we have been. In particular, the mechanisms and operations of power and are discovered in and through our entanglements and indeed complicities with these instrumentalities and operations (i.e. in and through our *experience*). "The experience through which we grasp the intelligibility of certain mechanisms ...and the way in which we are enabled to detach ourselves from them by perceiving them differently will be, at best, one and the same thing."³³ This no peripheral matter; it is rather Foucault's central preoccupation. Again, he is not only explicit but also emphatic about this: "That is really the heart of what I do. What consequences or implications does it have? ...I haven't written a single book that was not inspired, at least in part, by a direct personal experience. I've had [for example] a complex personal relationship with madness and with the psychiatric institution."³⁴ He goes on to cite also having had "a certain relationship with illness and death, confessing: "I wrote about the birth of the clinic and the introduction of death into medical knowledge when those

³⁰ Foucault, *Essential Works* 3, 281.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 227.

³² *Ibid.*, 223.

³³ *Ibid.*, 244.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

things had a certain importance for me.”³⁵ He acknowledges the “same is true of prisons and sexuality, for different reasons.”³⁶ In general, then his theoretical projects are accordingly rooted in his direct experience of specific situations. These specific situations are historically sedimented ones (thus, ones whose intelligibility depends on seeing them in light of how they are related to both prior human practices and contemporary cultural arrangements).

In his own manner, Dewey never tires of stressing that “we live from birth to death in a world of persons and things which is what it is because of what has been done and transmitted from previous human activities.”³⁷ The pragmatic import of this commonplace observation³⁸ is, however, not at all evident to everyone—especially in its far-reaching and deep-cutting implications: “The statement that individuals live in a world means, *in the concrete*, that they live in a series of situations.”³⁹ From Dewey’s perspective, our being-in-the-world or (more precisely) living-in-the-world does not refer to a vague, amorphous background against which human agency and practices stand out; rather it designates determinate, textured situations in which we are entangled and implicated.⁴⁰

In brief, we live *in situ*. Human experience in the Deweyan sense is an open-ended series of successive situations, but this characterization of experience is—despite being virtually Dewey’s own—somewhat misleading. For situations are not definitely marked off from one another—rather they are overlapping, entangled, entangling, and (in no small measure) antagonistic affairs. The import of experience, as a transaction⁴¹ between an organism and its

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Dewey, *Experience and Education*. All references to this work are to *Later Works of John Dewey*, volume 13, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 1991). LW 13, 22.

³⁸ In a very late manuscript, included as an appendix to *Experience and Nature*, Dewey stressed: “The excuse for saying obvious things is that much that now passes for empiricism is but a dialectical elaboration of data taken from physiology [or some other technical discourse, often of a very abstract character], so that it is necessary for any one, who seriously sets out to philosophize empirically, to recall to attention that he is talking about the sort of thing that the unsophisticated man [or woman] calls experience, the life he [or she] has led and undergone in the world of persons and things. Otherwise we get a stenciled stereotype in two dimensions and in black and white instead of the solid and many colored play of activities and sufferings which is the philosopher’s real datum.” (LW 1, 368-69)

³⁹ LW 13, 25; emphasis added.

⁴⁰ This concerns an almost Heideggerian aspect to Dewey’s pragmatism. As Heidegger writes: “Die Befindlichkeit erschließt das Dasein in seiner Geworfenheit und zunächst und zumeist in der Weise der ausweichende Abkehr.” (Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1953) In fact John Patrick Diggins emphasizes this in *The Promise of Pragmatism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994) where he writes: “Although Hook dismissed Heidegger’s *Being and Time* as metaphysical rubbish, the text contains some parallels with pragmatism, particularly the rejection of theory and abstract understanding in favor of the ordinary world of experience... Dewey [and] Heidegger...also insisted...that philosophy is similar to human existence in that it can be understood only historically, that is in the context of changing situations...” (411-412)

⁴¹ Dewey defined experience as a *transaction* between an organism and its environment. While he very often used *interaction* to designate this process he later distinguished between interaction and transaction. Even in his later writings, however, he was not entirely consistent in using these terms in contrast to one another (indeed, see below in this note one of his most succinct formulations from his later writings). Neither orga-

environment, is the fate of being caught up in the drama of such situations.⁴² In one sense, then, experience is a continuum (there are no absolute breaches in the flux of experience); but, in another sense, experience is punctuated in such a manner that it is a self-segmenting continuum (these segments are properly called *situations*). What marks off one situation from another—that is, what punctuates the continuum of experience into more or less identifiable segments (or “sentences,” perhaps “paragraphs” or even larger analogues of discursive units)—are pervasive qualities (qualities coloring and thereby unifying a sequence of actions and events in such a manner as to make of this sequence a drama or something akin to some other aesthetic genre). The work of thought is, in Dewey’s judgment, bound up with the discernment and articulation of the qualities constitutive of situations. Such work is best understood in reference to the situated, responsive sensibility of the artistic innovator, not the abstract, formalized procedures of some idealized inquirer.⁴³ It is part of an aesthetic of reflection⁴⁴ and, ultimately, an aesthetic of existence. Moreover, the work of such thought is equally bound up with practices of freedom. Loosening the grip of scientific rationality,⁴⁵ partly by strengthening aesthetic intelligence, provides both an exemplar of and an instrument for twisting free from an all too confining, perhaps even suffocating, past. The work of thought is in its most vital, efficacious form just this process of twisting free from parts of one’s past.

nism nor environment is definable apart from the process in question (however this process is identified or designated). “Experience is,” Dewey wrote in *Art as Experience*, “the result, the sign, and the reward of that interaction of organism and environment which, when it is carried to its full, is a transformation of interaction into participation and communication.” (LW 10, 28)

⁴² “Every case of consciousness is,” Dewey asserts in *Experience and Nature*, dramatic; drama is an enhancement of the conditions of consciousness.” (LW 1, 232)

⁴³ This argued forcefully in Dewey’s “Qualitative Thought” (1930). All references to this essay are to *Later Works of John Dewey*, volume 5 (Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 1984). Cited as LW 5. While qualitative judgments certainly may be superficial and immature, “they may also sum up and integrate prolonged previous experience and training, and bring to a unified head the results of severe and consecutive reflection” (LW 5, 250). The original datum is some qualitative whole in which we are implicated (*ibid.*). “The logic of artistic construction and esthetic appreciation is peculiarly significant because they exemplify in accentuated and purified form the control of selection of detail and a mode of relation, or integration, by a qualitative whole. The underlying quality demands certain distinctions.” (LW 5, 251) Qualitative thinking encompasses the drawing of these distinctions, the marking of these differences, for the sake of the intensification of experience. (see, e.g., LW 10, 41) Such thinking is truly an instance of thinking, not just a case of emotional response or subjective impressions. No form of thinking, including scientific inquiry, “gets away from qualitative existence. Directly, it always has its own qualitative background; indirectly, it has that of the world in which the ordinary experience of the common man [and woman] is lived.” (LW 5, 262) “Construction that is artistic is as much a case of genuine thought as that expressed in scientific and philosophical matters, and so is all genuine esthetic appreciation of art...” (*ibid.*) An aesthetic of existence in Foucault’s sense would be illuminated by a consideration of qualitative thought in the Deweyan sense. Part of my purpose here is to render this claim plausible.

⁴⁴ For what this expression means here, see the footnote immediately above.

⁴⁵ It is one thing to loosen the grip of scientific rationality, quite another to discredit or reject this form of reason. Dewey, no less than Foucault, offers nothing less than a critique of reason or, above all, the forms of rationality dominant in their own times. This does not make them advocates of irrationalism.

Polemos, Polemics, and Dialogue: The Practice of Freedom and the Work of Thought

Dewey's emphasis on experience is, as much as anything else, an insistence upon context, an insistence made as often in the name of situation as in that of context.⁴⁶ His reconstruction of logic as a theory of inquiry is unique or at least distinctive, in part because he not only refuses to abstract from the situation in which we are driven to undertake an investigation, but also because it makes situation central to any adequate treatment of the subject matter of logical inquiry.⁴⁷ As we have already noted, *situation* is in his logic a term of art. In Dewey's judgment, however, traditional logic is only one specific site of the theoretical occlusion for the situated character of human query. In "Context and Thought," one of his most important essays, Dewey stresses: "The significance of 'experience' for philosophic method is, after all, but the acknowledgment of the indispensability of context in thinking, when that recognition is carried to its full term."⁴⁸ Put otherwise, "experience is the name of the last inclusive context."⁴⁹ He makes explicit what was implicit in his own exploration of context *and* thought—the context of his efforts were to recall the importance of context, indeed the context in which his own discourse ought to be situated. That "implicit context" is the habitual neglect by traditional philosophers of most relevant contexts in their own theoretical engagements. Dewey goes so far as to assert that the neglect of context is "the most pervasive fallacy of philosophic thinking."⁵⁰

Context is not so much antecedently defined as continually renegotiated. Contexts are determined by contextualization; most often this takes the shape of a retrospective account bearing upon an ongoing deliberation. It is not only the case that definite demarcations between successive situations are hardly ever present, but also that univocal identifications of distinguishable situations are in principle never available (however often and effectively such identifications are imposed upon the scenes of our involvements). To live differently requires being capable of thinking differently. In turn, to think differently⁵¹ requires being able to name otherwise, to identify variously, the situations in which we are implicated, especially

⁴⁶ Though he often treats them as equivalent, there are places in which Dewey uses *situation* to designate something more specific and concrete than can be properly called a *context*.

⁴⁷ See Dewey's "Logic," one of his contributions to the *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (LW 8, 3-12); For an understanding and appreciation of this point, see Tom Burke's *Dewey's New Logic* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994); also Douglas Browning's "Designation, Characterization, and Theory in Dewey's Logic" in *Dewey's Logical Theory*, edited by F. Thomas Burke et al (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002), 60ff; and, finally, Burke's response to Browning's essay—"Browning on Inquiry into Inquiry, Part 1" in *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 45, 1 (2009), 27-44, and "Browning on Inquiry into Inquiry, Part 2" in *Transactions*, 45, 2 (2009), 157-76.

⁴⁸ John Dewey, "Context and Thought" in *The Later Works of John Dewey*, volume 6, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Press, 2008), 108.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ LW 6, 5.

⁵¹ "Not because it is always thinking something new but because it never stops thinking the same things differently." (Foucault, *Essential Works* 3, 444) "My way of being no longer the same is, by definition, the most singular part of what I am. Yet God knows there are ideological traffic police around, and we can hear their whistles blast: go left, go right, here, later, get moving, not now... The insistence on identity and the injunction to make a break both feel like impositions, and in the same way." (Foucault, *Essential Works* 3, 444)

those situations we have become accustomed to designate univocally, such that the very possibility of naming (or identifying) otherwise seems an assault on intelligibility, an eradication of meaning. All of this is rooted in a care for the self, in particular for this self, in this set of circumstances. Dewey brings the relevance of care into focus when he notes that: "There is selectivity (and rejection) found in every operation of thought. There is care, concern, implicated in every act of thought. There is some who has affection for some things over others; when he becomes a thinker he does not leave his characteristic affection behind."⁵² Foucault was not in the least averse to acknowledging his own situated, implicated self, hence it is certain that he would be unhesitant in avowing his animating, orienting concern (the care implicated in every act of his thought).

Situations must themselves be situated in a field, or more accurately a multiplicity of fields, so that a critical understanding of the power, limits, and mutability of these situations becomes (at least) an imminent possibility and (at best) a transformative factor.

The sense in which Dewey uses the term *context* calls for specification. "Context includes ...background and selective interest."⁵³ "Background is both temporal and spatial."⁵⁴ That is, "this background in thought is both temporal and spatial."⁵⁵ "The temporal background... is intellectual as well as existential."⁵⁶ There is "the background of culture" and, accordingly, that of "theory" in some sense of this word.⁵⁷

"Thinking takes place," Dewey notes, "in a scale of degrees of distance from the urgencies of an immediate situation in which something has to be done,"⁵⁸ or perhaps not the urgencies, but simply the constraints of such a situation, in which something might be done. Every form of human thinking is always animated and directed, frustrated no less than facilitated, by the qualitative context in which it emerges and by which it is sustained. Our understanding of thinking, however, typically fails to note the depth, ubiquity, and unmatched importance of the qualitative world in which all human thought, not only takes place, but also has its point.⁵⁹

At whatever distance from the urgencies of any situation, thinking does indeed take place. It often does so in ways that truly matter. In brief, thought can matter. In order to grasp the efficacy of thought, however, certain distinctions need to be drawn.

⁵² Dewey, "Context and Thought," 101.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁵⁹ "The world in which we immediately live, that in which we strive, succeed, and are defeated is," Dewey insists, "preeminently a qualitative world. What we act for, suffer, and enjoy are things in their qualitative determinations. This world forms the field of characteristic modes of thinking, characteristic in what thought is definitely regulated by qualitative considerations." (*LW* 5, 243) It is, however, likely that Foucault would be disposed to distance himself from this way of stating the matter, since it would have almost certainly sounded to him too much like the phenomenological notion of lived experience (a notion from which he took pains to distance himself). Even so, the shared emphasis on passionate saturation in the historical situation should not be occluded by an appreciation of this likely divergence.

However fuzzy the border between the two, it is illuminating to draw a distinction between the *social* and the *socialized* self. While Dewey tends to focus on the social self (without in the least denying either the ubiquity of socialization or the disfigurements due to this process), Foucault inclines toward a preoccupation with the socialized self. The social self is inescapably the socialized self and, in turn, the socialized self is by definition the normalized self. This being said, the social self can be conceived in such a way that s/he is not reducible to the socialized self. Above all else, this expression might be taken to highlight both the primordial sociality of the human animal and the enabling results of social constraints. The socialized self is always more than a subjugated being; the processes of normalization themselves secure, in some measure, resources for resistance.

What might surprise many readers is the extent to which Foucault takes thought to operate of its own accord. We are, without question, socially circumscribed agents and historically situated subjects, but we are also thoughtful beings. In addition, thought is *not* so much wind (i.e., it is not ineffectual musings in the recesses of an allegedly private consciousness, impotent manipulations of mostly public symbols for private fantasies lacking any objective mooring). Foucault was a person given to thought in a very strong sense, a sense he occasionally took pains to defend. Indeed, he devoted his life to thinking over and thinking through the situations in which we are enmeshed, i.e. situations by which he was partly defined.

The Foucaultian subject is always (at least, potentially) the thoughtful self. The thoughtful self, a being capable of inaugurating and sustaining various, even conflicting or contradictory lines of thought, is however an agent capable of twisting free from the dominant discourses and normalizing practices of its time and place. The thoughtful self contains within itself the resources for being more than the merely socialized self, for being other than what it actually or habitually is. Whatever the depth and degree of this self's indebtedness to its sociality (however much our capacity for thinking depends on our relations to others), thought is potentially efficacious. When the self is in dialogue with itself, it is not condemned simply to reenact roles acquired in its initiation into its culture, much less to repeat lines learned by the self in its exchanges with others. The self in dialogue with itself can be a matrix of novelty, a source of innovation.⁶⁰

We need to guard against conceiving the social world in such a way that our conception precludes the possibility, development, or efficacy of reflexive processes ("thought") wherein the self is able to turn upon itself, even against itself, and thereby deploy resources to become other than it has been. "We need to free ourselves of the sacralization of the social as the only instance of the real and stop regarding that essential element in human life and human relations—I mean thought—as so much wind. Thought does exist, both beyond and before systems and edifices of discourse."⁶¹ For Foucault (also for Dewey⁶²), the practice of freedom is inseparable from the actuality of thought. "There is always a little thought occurring even in the most stupid institutions; there is always thought even in silent habits."⁶³ The

⁶⁰ This is the facet of the subject, identified as such, stressed by Dewey. See, e.g., Dewey, *Experience and Nature*.

⁶¹ Foucault, *Essential Works* 3, 456.

⁶² See, e.g., chapter 5 of Dewey's *Experience and Education* (LW 13, 39-42).

⁶³ Foucault, *Essential Works* 3, 456.

denial of this fosters, at the very least, complicity with despair, the sense that all efforts at altering our institutions and practices are doomed to fail. "Criticism consists in uncovering that thought [occurring in the most stupid institutions, that implicit in silent habits] and trying to change it, etc"⁶⁴ Such criticism is both derived from and aimed at experience, for it is work undertaken "on the basis of elements of my own experience."⁶⁵ In his own case, this meant "[a]bandoning the empty form of a world revolution"⁶⁶ and adopting in its place the overflowing form of local resistance. Such resistance enjoins immersion and saturation in the situations into which one has been thrown.⁶⁷

Such saturation in situations⁶⁸ involves the intensification of experience. Dewey bears eloquent witness to this experiential process when he writes in *Art as Experience*:

Ultimately there are but two philosophies. One of them accepts life and experience in all its uncertainty, mystery, doubt, and half-knowledge and turns that experience upon itself to deepen and intensify its own qualities—to imagination and art. This is the philosophy of Shakespeare and Keats.⁶⁹

Though it may not be readily apparent, what Dewey means by deliberation is either just this process of intensification, or a process undertaken in the service of turning experience upon itself for the sake of deepening and intensifying the qualities of experience. His distinctive understanding of deliberation holds an important clue for discovering his distinctive conception of morals. In turn, his conception of morals points to a deep affinity between Dewey and Foucault. Coming to understanding more critically the meaning of our own actions is closely akin to thinking the unthought (to invoke Foucault's striking expression).

"The present, not the future, is ours,"⁷⁰ but it is ours primarily as the result of an appropriation, a process of making it our own, by remaking both the self and the situations in

⁶⁴ Foucault, *Essential Works* 3, 456. As Stephen Watson notes, "thought itself became [for Foucault] recognized as a perilous act, an event devoid not only of worldly foundation but of the codes of an *ethos*, the universal consensus of a *polis*, or demonstrable laws," ("Between Tradition and Oblivion": Foucault, the complications of form, the literatures of reason, and the aesthetics of existence," in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, ed. Gary Gutting (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 276).

⁶⁵ Foucault, *Essential Works* 3, 458.

⁶⁶ Foucault, *Essential Works* 3, 447.

⁶⁷ Cf. Arnold Davidson in *Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, 121.

⁶⁸ The drive to saturate oneself in the situations of one's life is, strikingly, once again one endorsed by Emerson (a direct influence on Dewey and, arguably, an indirect one, through Nietzsche, on Foucault). This is nowhere more manifest than in one of Emerson's entries in his voluminous journals: "The man thinks he can know this or that, by words and writing. It can only be known or done organically. He must plunge into the universe, and live in its form—sink to rise. None any work can frame unless himself become the same." *Emerson in His Journals*, selected and edited by Joel Porte (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 452... Closely connected to this is H. D. Thoreau's characterization in *Walden* of the intellect as a snout with which we burrow more deeply into some place. The ideal of aloof transcendence is here (rather ironically given the title "transcendentalists") being here displaced by that of passionate involvement and as complete immersion (or saturation) as possible.

⁶⁹ LW 10, 41.

⁷⁰ MW 14, 144.

which it is implicated. This involves discerning the implications of our own exertions, utterances, strivings, and even desires. If we are successful in this, then “we come to know the meaning of present acts, and to guide them in the light of that meaning. The moral is to develop conscientiousness, ability to judge the significance of what we are doing and to use that judgment in directing what we do ...”⁷¹ This does not mean “the direct cultivation of something called conscience” but rather “fostering those impulses and habits which experience has shown to make us sensitive, generous, imaginative, impartial in perceiving the tendency of our inchoate dawning activities.”⁷² This demands, “the auditing of present impulse and habit.” The delicate task of doing so is explicitly related by Dewey to one of our main themes, for the “important thing is,” he stresses, “the fostering of those habits and impulses which lead to a broad, just sympathetic *survey of situations*.”⁷³

The work of surveying situations in this fashion, for this purpose, is nothing other than deliberation in its distinctively Deweyan sense. “Deliberation [so understood] is irrational in the degree in which an end is so fixed, a passion or interest so absorbing, that the foresight of consequences is warped to include only what furthers execution of its predetermined bias. Deliberation is [in contrast] rational in the degree in which forethought flexibly remakes old aims and habits, institutes perception and love of new ends and acts.”⁷⁴

“Morals means growth of conduct in meaning.”⁷⁵ If we wanted to distill these insights into an imperative we should say: “‘So act as to increase the meaning of present experience.’ But even then in order to get instruction about the concrete quality of such increased meaning we should have to run away from law and study the needs and alternative possibilities lying with a unique and localized situation.”⁷⁶ Hence, it turns out that even this imperative, “like everything absolute, is sterile.”⁷⁷

Given the historical circumstances of Foucault’s life, he tended to stress “*practices of freedom over processes of liberation*.”⁷⁸ “You have situations where liberation and the struggle for liberation are indispensable for the practice of freedom. With respect to sexuality, for example—and I am not indulging in polemics, because I don’t like polemics, I think they are usually futile...”⁷⁹ Even so, the struggles of individuals to define and refashion their own sexuality is a question of liberation as much as “Freedom is the ontological condition of ethics. Without the actuality of freedom there is no possibility of ethics. But ethics is *the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection*.”⁸⁰

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., emphasis added.

⁷⁴ MW 14, 138.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 194.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 196.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Foucault, *Essential Works* 1, 283; emphasis added. See also Brad Stone’s contribution to this issue of *Foucault Studies*.

⁷⁹ Foucault, *Essential Works* 1, 284.

⁸⁰ Foucault, *Essential Works* 1, 284; emphasis added. Cf. Dewey.

The considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection is an inherently unstable, historically situated form. Moreover, it is informed by reflection in various ways. At this juncture, two ways are especially worthy of our attention. For Foucault's early characterization of dreams and his later gloss on fascism are relevant to our exploring the practice of freedom.

First, then, experience in dreaming "restores the movement of freedom in its authentic meaning, showing how it establishes itself or alienates itself, how it constitutes itself as radical responsibility in the world, or how it forgets itself and abandons itself to its plunge in causality."⁸¹ Our experience of dreaming is, at least for the early Foucault, far from irrelevant to the dream of fashioning an experience, in which freedom is vividly and dramatically realized here and now (amid these scenes and struggles, entangled in these relations of power and enmeshed in these regimes of normalization).

Second, the practice of freedom as envisioned by Foucault is also a struggle against fascism however, against the manifest forms of historical fascism, but also the subtler forms operative in social life and indeed the recesses of our own subjectivity⁸²—that is, "the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us."⁸³

Foucault is a paradoxical thinker in being one who so unsparingly endorses an agnostic (in the original sense, a "polemical") view of human existence, yet who so conscientiously disparages discursive polemics. On the one side, he insists: "The history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of a language: relations of power, not relations of meaning."⁸⁴ On the other side, Foucault is repulsed by the ethos of polemics, those

⁸¹ Michel Foucault, "Dream, Imagination and Existence" in *Dream and Existence*, a special issue of *Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry*, edited by Keith Hoeller, volume XIX, number 1, 31-78. Cf. James W. Bernhauer and Michael Mahon's "The ethics of Michel Foucault" in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 142-43.

⁸² In "Thoughts of Peace in an Air Raid," Virginia Woolf asks, "If we were free we should be out in the open, dancing, at the play, of sitting at the window talking together. What is it that prevents us?" "Her" answer in a word is: "'Hitler!' The loudspeakers cry with one voice. Aggressiveness, tyranny, the insane love of power made manifest, they reply. Destroy that, and you will be free." In truth, her answer is more nuanced, her voice more oppositional than one might imagine for someone so resolutely opposed to fascism. If the pilot in the plane overhead protecting Woolf and others "stops to think he may be killed; and we too. So let us think for him. Let us try to drag up into consciousness the subconscious Hitlerism that holds us down. It is the desire for aggression; the desire to dominate and enslave. Even in the darkness we can see that made visible. We can see shop windows blazing; and women gazing; painted women; dressed-up women... They are the slaves who are trying to enslave. If we could free ourselves from slavery we should free men from tyranny. Hitlers are bred by slaves." (Virginia Woolf, *Collected Essays*, volume 4, 174) "We must," Woolf goes on to insist, "help the young Englishmen to root out from themselves the love of medals and decorations. We must create more honorable activities for those who try to conquer in themselves their fighting instincts, their subconscious Hitlerism. We must compensate the man for his loss of his gun." (175; cf. "The Moral Equivalent of War" by William James and also the writings by Jane Addams on these topics)

⁸³ Foucault, "Preface" to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus, Capitalism, and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), xiii.

⁸⁴ Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977*, edited by Colin Gordon (NY: Pantheon Books, 1977), 114.

exchanges, in which the annihilation of one's adversary is—at least, in principle—warranted in some situations. “That’s not,” he asserts, “my way of doing things; I don’t belong to a world of people who do things that way. In insisting on this difference [between polemics and dialogue] as something essential: a whole morality is a stake, the morality that concerns the search for the truth and the relation to the other.”⁸⁵ This morality concerns not only this search and this relation, but also the focus of our concern—the practice of freedom itself. “In the serious play of questions and answers, in the work of reciprocal elucidation, etc.”⁸⁶ “The polemist, on the other hand, proceeds encased in privileges that he possesses in advance and will never agree to question. On principle, he possesses rights authorizing him to wage war and making that struggle a just undertaking ...”⁸⁷

When his reaction to polemics is not one of distaste or even disgust, Foucault’s attitude tends to be bemusement. “This great theme of ideological struggle makes me smile a little, given that each individual’s theoretical ties, when they are examined in their history, are tangled and fluctuating and don’t have the clear definition of a border which an enemy could be forced to flee.” On the hand, he wanted to puncture the exaggerated self-importance of self-avowed intellectuals: “Don’t intellectuals hope to give themselves, through ideological struggle, a greater political weight than they really have?” On the other hand, he wanted to transform polemical relations into cooperative ones: “Wouldn’t it be more serious, instead, to do research side by side, if in rather divergent directions?”

The transformation of this relationship is, at bottom, linked to Foucault’s struggle against fascism. “If one always insists,” he adds in the interview from which I have been quoting, “on saying that one is fighting an enemy, if a day comes when one finds oneself in a situation of actual warfare, which can always happen, will one then be tempted to treat him as such? That route leads directly to oppression; it is dangerous.” The work of understanding is not irrelevant even in the situation of being at war with the other, especially when this work resolutely refuses to take the form simply of righteous indignation and unqualified antagonism. It is telling that in this connection, Foucault exhibits a fallibilist sensibility, one of the defining traits of the pragmatist orientation: Rather than manifesting a desire to be taken seriously by “simulating warfare against an ideological opponent,” it “would be wiser to consider that those with whom one disagrees have made a mistake, or that one hasn’t understood what they were trying to do.”⁸⁸

Conclusion

There is no deeper affinity between John Dewey and Michel Foucault than the patient and painstaking labor both devoted to the always-justifiable impatience for freedom.⁸⁹ *This* is the

⁸⁵ Foucault, *Essential Works* 1 [Penguin], 111.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁸⁸ Foucault, *Essential Works* 3, 297.

⁸⁹ “I take care not to dictate how things should be. I try instead to pose problems, to make them active, to display them in such a complexity that they can silence the prophets and lawgivers, all those who speak for others or to others. In this way, it will be possible for the complexity of the problem to appear *in its connection with people’s lives*; and, consequently, through concrete questions, difficult cases, movements of rebellion, reflections, and testimonies, the legitimacy of a common creative action can also appear. It’s a matter of

center of each thinker's vision. If they diverge on some of the most important particulars regarding such patient labor (as I take them to diverge), it is above all because Dewey was more at home in his culture than Foucault was in his.⁹⁰ The depth and respects in which Dewey was at odds with his time and place should not be overlooked or minimized. Without ignoring or underplaying this, Dewey was less estranged from his culture than Foucault was from his. This points more than anything to the dramatic difference between being a straight and a gay person. In addition, it points to the differing evaluations of experiential qualities—above all, the evaluation by Foucault of limit-experiences as a means of intensifying life and that by Dewey of aesthetic experience sustaining, deepening, securing and enlarging as well as intensifying the qualitative immediacy of our situated engagements. Finally, Dewey's tendency to link the practices of freedom to questions of meaning and Foucault's proclivity to allow a pre-occupation with freedom to usurp considerations of meaning (more pointedly, his refusal to connect the question of freedom with that of meaning) is, arguably, not insignificant. To live under the sign of freedom is, for Foucault, to have freed the self from the hegemony of semi-otics, from the regime of signs.⁹¹

Pace Rorty, Dewey was not waiting for Foucault at the end of the road down which the latter was travelling; however, he did explore some of the terrain later traversed by Foucault. Moreover, the paths forged by Dewey in this exploration, do cross some of those blazed by Foucault (cf. William James in "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results" on philosophical inquirers being trail blazers). Their various intersections display a complex pattern of salient connections, not a simple priority (Dewey having arrived somewhere first) or even unproblematic kinship. This pattern is and ought to be problematic, because in the name of Dewey no less than Foucault, it needs to be problematized (and thus rendered in critical respects *variously* problematic). Questions of reception and appropriation, of blurring decisive differences and blunting critical edges, of historical specificity and cultural location, need not only be raised, but also pressed. My own efforts have ultimately been for the sake of preparing the basis for work on such questioning. Even so, those who have re-traced the steps of Dewey and, in far rarer instances, traced out some of the trajectories of his thought beyond anything he accomplished⁹² are likely to benefit by deviating from these paths (by traveling along over terrain with which they are unfamiliar), even following the lead of those drawn to re-tracing the ways blazed by Foucault. It is also likely that the converse is true. The texts of Dewey no less than those of Foucault provide us with nothing less than the resources for en-

working through things little by little, of introducing modifications that are able if not to find solutions, at least to change the given terms of the problem." (Foucault, *EW* 3, 288; emphasis added) It is a matter, in a word, of experimenting, hence, of trying "to see how far the liberation of thought can go toward making these trans-formations urgent enough for people to want to carry them out, and sufficiently difficult to carry out for them to be deeply inscribed in reality." (Foucault, *EW* 3, 457)

⁹⁰ On this point in Foucault see Paul Rabinow's "Foucault's Untimely Struggle: Toward a Form of Spirituality," *Theory, Culture and Society* 26(6), (2009), 25-44.

⁹¹ See Foucault's Foreword to *Anti-Oedipus*.

⁹² One of the deepest ironies regarding American pragmatism is the extent to which those who identify with this philosophical movement are so often engaged in unimaginative exegesis of familiar texts rather than actually putting pragmatism to work.

visioning an expansive array of alluring possibilities—in my judgment, none more important than the possibilities for imagining the practice of freedom, understood as the innermost meaning of ethical practice (of what it means, at bottom, to be ethical).

The debilitating constraints of the socialized self are inseparable from the enabling constraints of the social self (indeed, they are often, if not always, the very same constraints). If Foucault focused rather obsessively (at least until his last years) upon the debilitating and disfiguring constraints of the socialized self, the normalized subject, and if in turn Dewey celebrated somewhat uncritically the creative and emancipatory potential of the social self (above all, the capacity of such a self to enhance or even forge relationships with others, entirely free of exploitation or patronage, antagonism or aggression), this reflects different sensibilities, also contrasting strategic identities and concerns. These are truly differences that make a difference, in different situations in different ways. Precisely because this is the case, such differences help us discern the depth and multiplicity of affinities between John Dewey and Michel Foucault.

If I, hopefully showing signs of being a patient laborer, have done something to bring these diverse considerations into critical play, then it will have been justified. For it is always, in the end, a question of *what can be played*.⁹³ To bring Foucault into play in the context of Dewey's work—or Dewey in that of Foucault's—can be an idle comparison, a merely academic exercise. It still holds, however, the promise of contributing to our understanding of how to take up anew the practice of freedom. The promise of possibility—especially the unanticipated promises of polymorphous possibilities (cf. MF)—seems, to me at least, the most appropriate form of articulation in which claims regarding the practice of freedom are uttered. Our impatience for freedom is nowhere more manifest than in the disorders and disordering of our desires. Neither Dewey nor Foucault took these to be the substance of freedom as such, but they can be occasions for practices of freedom.

The disruption of established harmony, resulting from (above all else) the play of disordering desires, is in itself an aim of the practice to which John Dewey and Michel Foucault devoted their intellectual lives. The inescapable conclusion that their intellectual lives were one with their political struggles, makes of their deep affinities and even deeper divergences a constellation of positions, to be configured now in this manner and reconfigured soon afterwards in this other way. The power of intelligence—that of thought—is nowhere more evident than in our ability to make our practices more reasonable, our institutions more intelligent, especially when we are able to do so in such a manner that the very forms of rationality, our understanding of intelligence itself, are transfigured.⁹⁴ The life and work of Dewey and

⁹³ “We must think that what exists is far from filling all possible spaces. To make a truly unavoidable challenge of the question: *What can be played?*” (Foucault, *Essential Works* 1, 140; emphasis added) “The problem, then, is,” as Foucault also asserts, “to acquire the rules of law, the management techniques, and also the morality, the *ēthos*, the practice of the self, that will allow us to play these games of power with as little domination as possible” (Foucault, *Essential Works* 1, 298). Possibilities are inscribed in the folds and interstices of the actual world in which human agents are thrown. If philosophical thought is a maieutic art, it is because it concerns assisting in the birth of such possibilities.

⁹⁴ “If it is extremely dangerous to say that Reason is the enemy that should be eliminated, it is just as dangerous to say that any critical questioning of this rationality risks sending us into irrationality. One should not

Foucault bear witness to these possibilities.⁹⁵ They hold out the promise of nothing less than this.

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forget – and I am not saying this to criticize rationality, but in order to show how ambiguous things are – it was on the basis of the flamboyant rationality of social Darwinism that racism was formulated, becoming one of the most enduring and powerful ingredients of Nazism. This was, of course, irrationality, but an irrationality that was at the same time, after all, a certain form of rationality.” (Foucault, “Space, Knowledge, and Power” in *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow (NY: Pantheon Books, 1984), 249)

⁹⁵ In the “Introduction” for the 1948 edition of *Reconstruction of Philosophy* Dewey quoted C. D. Darlington, in his judgment “a distinguished English man of science” (MW 12, 262): “We need a Ministry of Disturbance, a regulated source of annoyance; a destroyer of routine; an underminer of complacency.” Immediately after quoting Darlington, Dewey adds: “The routine of custom tends to deaden even scientific inquiry; it stands in the way of *discovery* and of the *active* scientific worker. For discovery and inquiry are synonymous as an occupation. Science is a *pursuit*, not a coming into possession of the immutable...” (MW 12, 263) This is even truer of social transformation. If anything Foucault played this role more vibrantly and effectively than even Dewey.