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What is Critique?

Patrick Ffrench

Michel Foucault's lecture 'What is Critique?' (1978), an earlier and significantly different version of the better known 'What is Enlightenment?'¹ (1983) begins by transforming the titular *question* into a *project*:

What is critique? It might be worth trying out a few ideas on this project that keeps taking shape [*se former*], being extended and reborn on the outer limits of philosophy [*aux confins de la philosophie*], very close to it, up against it, at its expense [*tout près d'elle, tout contre elle, à ses dépens*], in the direction of a future philosophy and in lieu, perhaps, of all possible philosophy [*à la place peut-être de toute philosophie possible*].²

I have focused in on this assertive opening in order to emphasise the experimental character of what Foucault thinks critique is, as well as its iterative, insistent nature. Foucault immediately displaces the form of the question. The demand for ontological definition voiced by the 'what is?' is undercut by the proposition that critique, as a project, is always in the process of taking shape and being reborn; it is not yet. Despite this nascent quality, Foucault makes strong claims for the role and future of critique, and especially its relationship to philosophy. Positioned 'on the outer limits of philosophy', abutting it in a way which speaks of intimacy but also enmity, the insistence of critique is at the same time towards a philosophy to come and in lieu of philosophy as such; critique has the potential to take the place of philosophy.

This is a strong claim given that Foucault is addressing the members of the *Société française de philosophie*. In fact this opening hints at one of the answers Foucault will give to the question posed by his provisional title: critique 'only exists in relation to something other than itself' and 'seems to be condemned to dispersion, dependency and pure heteronomy'.³ To ask 'what is critique' (as opposed to 'what is *a* critique') suggests that we can define it in its generality, yet, as Judith Butler observes: 'Critique is always a critique *of* some instituted practice, discourse, episteme, institution, and it loses its character the moment in which it is abstracted from its operation and made to stand alone as a purely generalizable practice'.⁴ The point here is the resistance embodied by critique to the idea of a 'purely generalizable practice'. It is a 'function', Foucault says, 'which is subordinated in relation to what

philosophy, science, politics, ethics, law, literature, etc., positively constitute'.⁵ It is its very subordination to the 'positive constitution' of 'purely generalizable practices' which critique contests.

To propose then that critique, which is always in the process of taking shape, has the potential to take the place of philosophy is to say that the positively constituted forms of philosophy, science, politics, and so on, are to be transformed by a function which up to now has been subordinate to them and stands in relation to them. If critique is to take the place of philosophy, it follows that part of its task, the 'general imperative' which it follows, is to contest its subordination, to assume a function of insubordination.

Foucault will define this 'general imperative' as a form of virtue and will shape this virtue into a critical attitude in relation to what he identifies as the era of governmentalization, in which the 'art of governing men' has been extended beyond the spiritual domain.⁶ The critical attitude is born out of the 'perpetual question' within this era of: 'how not to be governed like that, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them'.⁷ It will take the form of a 'critical ontology of ourselves' which will identify limits and discontinuities within the nexus of knowledge-power.⁸ It will also draw from the example of those who have sought to stylize their lives through an 'aesthetics of existence', in which one is governed not by a set of positively established norms but by the aesthetic practice of making a work of oneself.⁹ It will also take the form of an effort to loosen the knot of the threefold relation between subjectivity, truth and power. Foucault writes:

And if governmentalization is indeed this movement through which one sought in reality itself a social practice of subjugating (*pratique sociale d'assujettir*) individuals through mechanisms of power which made a claim to truth, well, I would say that critique is the movement through which a subject gives themselves the right to interrogate [*se donne le droit d'interroger*] truth about its effects of power and to interrogate power in its discourses on truth.¹⁰

There is a clear opposition between subjugation and the movement through which subjects 'give themselves the right to interrogate'. While we might pause over the question of how one may *give oneself* something, this will have to wait for another time.¹¹ Foucault immediately capitalises upon the agency implied in the last phrase with the shorter definition of the 'critical attitude' as 'the art of voluntary insubordination'.¹²

Already with virtue with are on the terrain of moral education and perfectionism.¹³ Here, and further on, the fact that critique starts with the will to ‘give oneself the right’, and develops, with Kant’s ‘Was ist Aufklärung?’, into a ‘call for *courage*’ [*appel au courage*] to exit the state of minority and to relinquish unquestioning obeisance to authorities, further concretises the voluntaristic basis from which critique arises.¹⁴

Foucault makes a distinction, or marks out a ‘slippage’, between Kantian critique, which seeks to ‘know knowledge’ through the identification of limits, to establish autonomy through a recognition of the limits of knowledge, on the one hand, and the ‘decision-making will not to be governed’ on the other hand.¹⁵ The question, Foucault says, is *not* how can the indivisible knot of knowledge and power which produces singularities and events be undone through attention to the transcendental or semi-transcendental conditions of knowledge, but rather, how can we be reversed or released from the ‘concrete strategic fields’ in which knowledge and power have imprisoned us.¹⁶ This question is more urgent; it is a political question, pertaining to subjugation and struggle. The starting point is not an epistemological project or quest but ‘the decision not to be governed’, an axiomatic insubordination.

The motif of courage resurfaces in Foucault’s final lectures through a focus on *parrhesia*, truth-telling or frank-speaking, and in the context of discussion of the relation between the government of self and the government of others, hinged around the relation of the counsellor or truth-teller to the Prince. If what Foucault wants to undertake in the lectures on ‘the courage of truth’ is a ‘genealogy of the critical attitude in Western philosophy’¹⁷ he begins with the Greek practice of *parrhesia*. This is a means of pursuing the question of the courage of insubordination broached in ‘What is Critique?’. Indeed in the final lecture course of 1983–84, having noted that it is difficult ‘for us’ to ‘recapture this notion of *parrhesia*’ Foucault marks it out as a specifically ‘political’ notion, and underlines that his interest in it is due to the fact that it allows ‘the possibility of posing the question of the subject and truth from the point of view of the practice of what could be called the government of oneself and others’.¹⁸ *Parrhesia*, then, is the ‘prehistory’ of the later ‘critical attitude’ which allows one to study the triple knot of subject, power and truth.¹⁹

Perhaps, then, it is in the conditions of *parrhesia* that we can recover something of the courage of critique. But what are these conditions? We can offer the barest of outlines here:

- 1) *Parrhesia* is a ‘speech activity’; it takes place under quite specific conditions of interlocution. Specifically, it requires that the parrhesiast be in a position of inferiority to the authority to which s/he speaks.

- 2) *Parrhesia* is an act of courage, implying risks. These risks are related to the conditions of the interlocutory act in question but are also closely tied to relations of power, since in speaking the truth the speaker runs the risk of ‘undermining that relationship which is the condition of possibility of his discourse’. In certain cases the risk is death.²⁰
- 3) *Parrhesia* ‘can no longer occur in our modern epistemological framework’, because, after Descartes, to be brief, truth and knowledge require experiential evidence, while *parrhesia* requires the moral criterion of courage in the face of danger.²¹

This account has led us from critique as a function of insubordination to *parrhesia* as an interlocutory relationship involving courage and risk, one which is by definition susceptible to destroy the structure of interlocution. While we may not wish to recover the arguably paranoiac aspects of the parrhesiast, who ‘says what is true because he *knows* that it is true; and he *knows* that it is true because it really is true’,²² there may be something to recapture in the criterion of courage and the specification of the interlocutory conditions in which critique can arise and speak in the face of risk.

¹ Foucault, Michel, ‘What is Enlightenment’ in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *Ethics: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984 volume 1* (London: Penguin, 1997), 303–19. See also the first two lectures of the course *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France 1982–83*, in Frédéric Gros (ed.), trans. Graham Burchell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1–39.

² Foucault, Michel, ‘What is Critique?’ in Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth (eds.), *The Politics of Truth*, trans. Lysa Hochroth (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997), 27–82, 24. The original French text can be found in *Qu’est-ce que la critique suivi de La Culture de soi* (Paris: Vrin, 2015), 33–80, 34.

³ Foucault, ‘What is Critique?’, 25.

⁴ Butler, Judith, ‘What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue’ in Sarah Salih (ed.), *The Judith Butler Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 302–22.

⁵ Foucault, ‘What is Critique?’, 25.

⁶ Foucault, ‘What is Critique?’, 25, 27. See also the last three lecture courses at the Collège de France: *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981–82*, Frédéric Gros (ed.), trans. Graham Burchell (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); *The Government of Self and Others* and *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: lectures at the Collège de France 1983–84*, in Frédéric Gros (ed.), trans. Graham Burchell (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

⁷ Foucault, ‘What is Critique?’, 28.

⁸ Foucault, ‘What is Enlightenment?’, 316.

⁹ The interview ‘On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress’ in Foucault, *Ethics*, 253–80, gives a useful account of this substantial thematic in Foucault’s later work.

¹⁰ Foucault, ‘What is Critique?’, 32 (translation modified); ‘Qu’est-ce la critique?’, 39.

¹¹ Briefly, one would need to insist on the necessity of a structure of interlocution, or in a Wittgensteinian sense, language use, as a criterion for the gift. See Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958) §268. Cited by Stephen Mulhall in ‘Re-Monstrations: Heidegger, Derrida and Wittgenstein’s Hand’, *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 26.1 (1995), 68.

¹² Foucault, ‘What is Critique?’, 32.

¹³ Given further scope, I would want to develop potential associations between critique and the notion of moral perfectionism elaborated by Stanley Cavell, for example in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

¹⁴ Foucault, ‘What is Critique?’, 33; ‘Qu’est-ce que la critique?’, 41.

¹⁵ Foucault, 'What is Critique?', 36, 61.

¹⁶ Foucault, 'What is Critique?', 60.

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, Joseph Pearson (ed.), (New York: Semiotext(e), 2001), 170–1.

¹⁸ Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 6, 8.

¹⁹ Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 7.

²⁰ Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 11.

²¹ Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 14.

²² Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 14.