

**MICHEL FOUCAULT :  
A CRITIQUE OF IMMANUEL KANT**

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The objective of this paper is to put forth and discuss critically the criticism of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) by Michel Foucault (1926-84). As a matter of fact, Foucault wrote little about Philosophy in terms of epistemology, ontology and so on. The subjects with which Foucault dealt with are such as madness, hospitals, prisons, infamy, sexuality, etc. But he is philosophically preoccupied with conversation on reason, language, knowledge power, along with the structure of classical *episteme* including that of Kant besides being greatly under the influence of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud.

In the above, I have mixed great many issues together. In what follows I shall try to sort them out. In order to organize the discussion, I regard Foucault a postmodernist in as much as Kant is a modernist. Since postmodernity, as Jean-Francois Lyotard says, is a 'rewriting modernity', Foucault retains many aspects of Kantian modernity, yet rejects the norms of strict logic and rationality which characterize the latter. With this clarification I shall come to Foucault's criticism of Kant and modernism as such.

Foucault has aimed a strong reaction not only at Kant, but also at René Descartes (1596-1650), the father of modernism. Foucault's reactions can be dubbed as 'postmodern' which,

"... did indeed become the systematic rejection of the most basic premises of modern European philosophy : the celebration of self and subjectivity, the new appreciation of history, and most of all the already flagging philosophical confidence in our ability of know the world as it really is. It was, in a phrase, the wholesale rejection of the transcendental pretence".<sup>1</sup>

Foucault notes that modern philosophical reflection, especially that of Kant, is preoccupied with 'man' or human subjectivity. He says, "... before the end of the eighteenth century, *Man* did not exist and that *he* will disappear with the (apparently imminent) collapse of the modern episteme".<sup>2</sup> Foucault appreciates Kant's refusal to go along the lines of Descartes and Hume who, in modernism, have made mistakes in Man's quest for knowledge. Kant, as a matter of fact, allows that 'all our knowledge begins with sensibility'.<sup>3</sup> Kant's critical philosophy questions representation on the basis of its rightful limits and thereby sanctions for the first time, compared to Descartes and Hume, the withdrawal of knowledge and thought outside the space of representation. The entire classical rationalism and empiricism appears to Kant just as dogmatism because they accept reason and representation respectively without critically examining them. Kant, in *Critique of Pure Reason*, has the purpose to question, apart from reason and representation, all that is the source and origin of these two, i.e. transcendental consciousness. To question their origin is to challenge that authority and thus to outdo dogmatism. In Kant's modernism, knowledge forms a homogeneous whole from philosophy to mathematics to empirical sciences. In Foucault, knowledge explodes in different directions and can no longer be understood as a linear series of enquiries employing the same basic method in different domains. Foucault furnishes three distinct dimensions to the field of knowledge - philosophical, mathematical and empirical sciences. This is the way that we go from unity (in Kant) to fragmentation (in Foucault).

In the context of Kant's epistemological - situation, Foucault goes on to note two points that worry him. First, Kant's position on representation is inadequate. Secondly, Kant's transcendental consciousness requires transformation in terms of Life, Labour and Language. Let us dwell on these issues.

Foucault's structuralism gives rise to a new conception of the *sign* which tries to displace the role Kant gave to representation. Foucault's criticism of Kantian modernity is, in fact, a criticism of what Foucault calls the 'decline or failure of representation'. This, however, does not mean that Foucault rejects the role of representation in his theory of *sign* once and for all. His point is that representation cannot be regarded a self-justifying starting point. This is because,

“... representation has lost the power to provide a foundation ... for the links that can join its various elements together. No composition, no decomposition, no analysis into identities and differences can now justify the connections of representations one to another. The power of representation must instead be sought outside representation, beyond its immediate visibility in a sort of behind - the - sciences world even deeper and more dense than representation itself”.<sup>4</sup>

Foucault's philosophical preoccupation seems to be something like that of Kant when the latter refuses to go along the lines of Hume, although he has accepted the basic empiricist premise that all human knowledge begins with sensibility, that sensibility alone provides the *content* for the concepts of understanding, that “All thought must, directly or indirectly ... relate ultimately to intuitions, and therefore with us, to sensibility, because in no other way can an object be given to us”.<sup>5</sup> But Kant has also to say that ‘percepts without concepts are blind’. The blindness of percepts means their ‘meaninglessness’ and their meaningfulness can be found beyond the precepts, just as Foucault says that ‘the power or representation must be sought outside representation’. Kant shows that the meaning of percepts lies in the concepts. He demonstrates that the transcendental consciousness consists of forms of intuition (space and time) and forms of understanding (the categories) which are not static forms but forms of operation that exist only in the act of apprehending and comprehending sensibility. The forms of intuition synthesize the manifold of sensibility into spatio-temporal order. By virtue of the categories, the results of the spatio-temporal order are brought to the universal and necessary relations of cause and effect, substance, quality, etc. And this entire complex is unified in the transcendental consciousness which relates all experience to the ‘thinking ego’ thereby giving experience to the continuity of being ‘My’ experience. The transcendental consciousness is the matrix, the non-perceptual sources of universality and necessity in the perceptual world, “The order and regularity that we find in the field of appearances, we ourselves introduce”.<sup>6</sup>

Kant's transcendental consciousness is the true spectator. It transcends the validity of knowledge and has no objective co-relate which could be its ‘expression’.<sup>7</sup> By transcendental consciousness, Kant, however, does not mean the biological being or the social being. Kant has drawn a distinction between man as a transcendental being that constitutes the objects of knowledge, and

man as an empirical being which itself is an object of that knowledge. Foucault observes a dualism in Kantian subjectivity and points out that there are many such dualisms in Kant, like, *a priori* and synthetic, understanding and representation, faith and knowledge, and so on. Foucault defines man in terms of Life, Labour and Language which display particular characteristics of man's finitude as the basis of the objective relativity of these domains. Foucault explains,

"The forces of life that form me as an organism are given to me as an economic being are given by my desire; the forces of language that from my speaking and writing are given by my expression".<sup>8</sup>

In the "Analytic of Finitude", Foucault carries out the project to a philosophical effort to show under what conditions human finitude can be appreciated. In Foucault's terminology, "... finitude as *founding* is 'the fundamental', finitude as founded is 'the positive'. The project of modern philosophy has been to discover a relation between the fundamental and the positive that will support a coherent account of human finitude's self foundation. The difficulty of the project lies in the fact that the relation must somehow be both one of identity (since man is one being) and differences (since nothing can literally precede and produce itself) ... the effort of modern philosophy to develop an analytic of finitude have taken three main forms, corresponding to three different ways of taking the fundamental positive pair. One relates man as a transcendental subject to man as an empirical object; an other relates man as thinking *cogito* to man as the unthought the *cogito* tries to grasp; a third relates man as a return of his origin to the present to man as a retreat of his origin into the past".<sup>9</sup> Let us briefly examine Foucault's charges on 'the transcendental-empirico doublet' (Kant), 'the *cogito* and the unthought' (Descartes) and 'the retreat and return of the Origin'.

On Kant's 'transcendental-empirico doublet', Foucault has developed two different approaches. One in which, "knowledge has anatomico-physiological conditions, that it is formed gradually within the structures of the body", and in the second, "knowledge had historical, social, or economic conditions, ... in short that there was a *history* of human knowledge which could both be given to empirical knowledge and prescribe its forms".<sup>10</sup> In the former, Kant's transcendental aesthetic is regarded as the object of knowledge in terms of human

biological body. It tries to show that human knowledge is essentially empirical in nature in terms of its basic characteristics and determinations. In the latter, human knowledge is regarded as historical rather than biological. This is a view that has developed out of Kant's transcendental dialectic to Marx's dialectical materialism via Hegel's dialectic of the *Geist*.

There is, however, another view which Foucault has failed to mention and which has played an extremely important role in systematizing Kant. Fichte tries to systematize Kant's transcendental knowing self with the noumenal acting self. There is but one self, according to Fichte, an active, moral striving self, whose primary concern is moral self-relaxation. Once the dualism between the world of 'knowing' and the world of 'doing' is overcome by positing one-self, Fichte proclaims, the nature of self, then, is to act and its essential goal is the realization of its own freedom. In fact, Fichte's whole labour is devoted to bridge the gulf between the first and the second *Critique*. Fichte interprets the self he has derived from Kant's first *Critique* with the essential qualities of the self of Kant's second *Critique*. On the one hand, the self is transcendental, whose fundamental thrust is its own intuition of itself, on the other hand, it is primarily a moral self, free-in-itself, who subsumes even knowledge particularly self knowledge to its moral pursuits.

But Foucault has a different way of interpreting Kantian self. In order to outdo transcendental pretence in philosophy, Foucault highlighted the dualism between transcendental self and the empirical self. This is shown by Foucault by an example. He draws a distinction between particular truths in the fields of biology, physics and human knowledge, and the general truths concerning the history of biology, physics and human cognition,

"To accept these as two irreducibly different kinds of truth would of course immediately reinstate a sharp distinction between the empirical and the transcendental. The reductionist approach must, therefore, find some way of giving a single account of both empirical and philosophical truth, basing the latter on the former or vice-versa",<sup>11</sup>

The 'positivists', Foucault says, base philosophical truth on the empirical truth, and that of basing empirical truth on philosophical truth, he calls "eschatological". The positivists, as a matter of fact, regard the truth of our philosophical knowledge as dependent on the truth of the knowledge of physics

and biology. The eschatological view - point says that our scientific and historical accounts of empirical objects are true in virtue of the truth (once it is achieved) of our philosophical discourse about knowledge. But Foucault regards both alternatives as self defeating. Foucault says,

“On the positivist approach we set out to give a philosophical account of the possibility of empirical truths but wind up grounding this very account on the empirical truths that are in question. On the eschatological approach we base empirical truth on philosophical truth and thereby abandon our initial project of working solely on the level of empirical objects ... efforts (by, e.g. Comte and Marx) to carry out the reductionist project typically fluctuate between positivism and eschatology. But no matter how it is developed, ... the project is one in which ‘pre-critical naivete’ holds undivided rule”.<sup>12</sup>

About positivism, it may be pointed out that from Hume to the present-day logical atomists (Russell and earlier Wittgenstein) and logical positivists (like A. J. Ayer) take it for granted that all our knowledge of the world is derived from sense data, which are unconnected and completely separate from one another. The basic principles of positivism have been the ultimate authority of the fact and observing the ‘immediate given’ has been the method of analysis and verification. Positivism induces thought to be satisfied with the facts, to renounce their transgression beyond them and to bow to the given state of affairs.

Similarly, about Marxism, it may be pointed out that for Marx, Engels and Lenin, matter is spatio-temporal and is constantly in motion. With the three dialectical laws - quantitative to qualitative changes and vice-versa, unity and struggle of opposites, and negation of negation - consciousness about the world has evolved. It is matter which is primary and consciousness is secondary.

Foucault regards both the schools of Positivism and Marxism as ‘reductionists’ if these two schools are compared with Kant. Positivism overemphasizes Kant’s phenomenon and rejects Kant’s claim for the transcendental. Marxism overemphasizes materialism in Kant and underestimates Kant’s transcendental consciousness. Because of this, reductive project in positivism and Marxism, Foucault says, we should not be surprised at their recent *reapprochement*.

If reductionism is to be overcome, both empirical and transcendental require resisting reduction of the empirical to the transcendental and vice-versa. It implies Foucault's attempt to revive Cartesian dualism in which *cogito* must be one that sees human consciousness as inextricably tied to an unthought (Cartesian extension or body) that cannot be entirely allowed that philosophical reflection on man in terms of the *cogito* and the unthought avoids the incoherence of attempts to reduce the transcendental to the empirical and vice-versa. In such a situation, man as the constituting subject of knowledge and its conflicts with man as the constituted object is sustained. The analytic of finitude that comes out of such a conflict is however not resolved and as Foucault argues that in the situation, the conflict or the dualism remains.

Foucaultian reading of Descartes' *cogito* is closely related to the history of madness. As a matter of fact, the deceptive nature of senses leads Descartes to the total denunciation of senses, the effort to destroy all his previous beliefs in the effort to start all over again on first ground, that is, certitude. However, as Descartes subsequently admits, the deceptive nature of sensibility is not as strong and radical as the deceptions interior to the mind as experienced passively either in sleep or in madness. These are the questions of the 'interiority of the mind' as opposed to the exterior - the sensible and physical about experience in relation to the world. In the case of the deception by the senses we know that we are being deceived. But there are certain occasions when we are deceived, we may not even know it or be able to recognize it as such, as in the case of dream and madness; Descartes writes,

"But it may be that although the senses sometimes deceive us concerning things which are hardly perceptible, or very far away, there are yet many others to be met with as to which we can not reasonably have any doubt, although we recognize them by their means. For example, there is the fact that I am here seated by the fire, attired in a dressing gown, having this paper in my hands and other similar matters. And how could I deny that these hands and this body are mine, were it not perhaps that I compare myself to certain persons devoid of sense, whose cerebella are so troubled and clouded by the violent vapours of black bile, that they constantly assure us that they think that they are kings when they are really quite poor, or that they are clothed in purple when they are really without covering, or who imagine that they have an earthenware head

or are nothing but pumpkins or are made of glass. But they are made and I should not be any less insane were I to follow examples so extravagant".<sup>13</sup>

The above passage occupies an important place in Foucault's reading of Descartes. Foucault claims that there is a basic imbalance in what he calls the 'economy of doubt' between dreams and madness. He says, "dreams or illusions are surmounted within the structure of truth; but madness is inadmissible for the doubting subject".<sup>14</sup> Foucault's reading shows that like Descartes, there is certainly a fundamental difference between sensations and madness, that these two can function independent of each other. The distinction between sensation and madness is the prerequisite to develop norms or standards in our thought. This new way of defining thought is decisive for Foucault, in so far as its normative character, established at the expense of madness, outlines the very possibility of history, as a "meaningful language that is transmitted and consummated in time".<sup>15</sup>

To overcome the dualism, Foucault proposes 'the retreat and return of the Origin'. The dualism in modernism which Foucault calls 'Man's double nature' can be resolved by reflecting on man as historical reality. Foucault suggests,

"... from this point of view, the 'positive' aspect of human finitude is found in the fact that man is, from the very first instance of his existence, burdened (even constituted) by a history that is not of his own making. In one sense, of course, this is true of anything, since there is nothing in the world that begins to exist without arising from something other than itself ... the ordinary things of the world originate as members of a series of homogeneous elements. The 'other' from which they arise is another of the same sort. Man, however, as the unique reality capable of knowing the world of which he is nonetheless a part, originates from what is essentially other than him. It is as though his origin is the limit of a series of terms (man's history) to which it does not belong. If, then, man tries to discover his essential nature and identity by tracing back his history to its origin, he will be continuously frustrated. Any point of apparent origin that lies on the line of human history will be found not to be the true origin. On the other hand, the true origin (the point of application of the conditions that in fact produced man) will be a point



at which man as such is not present; it will not, strictly speaking, be *his* origin. This is the sense in which man's origin constantly retreats from him. It is a limit that he can never reach by going back through the series of events that make up his history".<sup>16</sup>

Foucault takes up history as a human convention and man himself is a part of that history. Outside man, in nature, we simply come across one event following another and it will not be a part of the temporal series of meaningful actions that constitute history. History begins only with the projects of human consciousness and the world is, after all, constituted as an historical reality only through human consciousness. And in his history, as stated above, man constantly retreats himself when he tries to search his originality.

In conclusion, we can say that Foucault's criticism of Kant does not mean that Foucault has rejected whatsoever is there in Kant such as human subjectivity, transcendental pretence, representation and so on. Foucault is certainly not anti-Kant in the sense of being backward-looking. Foucault does not want to reinstate the norms of religion and tradition which Kantian modernism has repudiated. Nor does Foucault want to abide by the strict logic, rationality and unity in Kant. But Foucault like Kant constantly attempts to avoid dogmatism in philosophy. Instead of Kantian subjectivity in terms of representation, understanding, reason, knowledge, etc., Foucault develops a concept of Man in terms of Life, Labor and Language and use new terminologies to explain it such as formations, positivities, sign and discursive practices. Foucault thus begins with Kantian philosophical preoccupations but he transcends Kantian conclusions.

## NOTES

1. Solomon, R. C., *Continental Philosophy since 1750*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 194.
2. Gutting, Gary, *Michel Foucault's Archaeology of Scientific Reason* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 181.
3. Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. K. Simth (London, MacMillan Press Ltd. 1973), B1/B2, p. 41-42.

4. Gutting, Gary, *Michel Foucault's Archaeology of Scientific Reason* etc., p. 182.
5. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, etc. A 19, p. 65.
6. *Ibid.*, A125, pp. 146-147.
7. *Ibid.*, B156, B430, p. 193 & 382.
8. Gutting, Gary, *Michel Foucault's Archaeology of Scientific Reason* etc., p. 200.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 200.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 201.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 201.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 202.
13. Descartes, Rene', *Discourse on Method and the Meditations* trans. F. E. Sutcliffe (Penguin Books, 1979), P. 102.
14. Foucault, Michel, *Folie-et deraison : L'Histoire de la folie al'age Classique*. In Dalia Judovitz, "Descartes and Derreda : Economizing Thought" in *Continental Philosophy II* (ed) H. J. Silverman (NewYork & London, Routledge, 1989), p. 44.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
16. Gutting, Gary *Michel Foucault's Archaeology of scientific Reason, etc., p. 205.*