

Michel

FOUCAULT

GREAT THINKERS

CHRISTOPHER WATKIN

Foreword by Esther Meek

“Christopher Watkin’s *Michel Foucault* does us an enormous double favor. It briefly and carefully outlines the main features and developments of an important twentieth-century thinker, and it brings these into conversation with a Reformed, philosophically adept account of the Bible. Watkin manages to do all this without any ‘ventriloquizing’ of either Foucault or Scripture. He allows readers to sympathetically feel the weight of Foucault’s concerns about such things as the telling of history, the limits of cultural vision, self-transformation, and, above all, power relations, before turning to an examination of the cross of Christ that simultaneously fulfills and critiques Foucault’s ambitious aims. If God is the absolute being whose definitive self-disclosure is the humble self-giving of Jesus Christ, then individuals and communities can find in Christ an objective, normative pattern of life that neither crushes the self nor dominates others. As I reached the end of this book, I was wishing that the great atheist philosopher himself could have read this friendly interaction with his thought.”

—**John Dickson**, Author and Historian; Rector,
St. Andrew’s Roseville; Founding Scholar , Centre for
Public Christianity; Lecturer, Faculty of Arts and Social
Sciences, University of Sydney

“Michel Foucault is undoubtedly one of the most significant voices in our times. The twin temptation when dealing with him is either to lionize him as a unique prophet who has unmasked the way in which we all abuse power, or to dismiss him as a Nietzschean voice against truth and divine revelation. In the capable hands of Chris Watkin, Foucault does emerge as a helpful guide to how we use and abuse power, yet one who in the end is deeply flawed. Christians may safely benefit from Foucault as a cobelligerent in several areas, including social criticism, while at the same time recognize the chasm between his approach and

that of the Reformed Christian worldview. An absolute treasure of a book.”

—**William Edgar**, Professor of Apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary

“For a long time, I have had the conviction that Cornelius Van Til and the Reformed tradition provide a multitude of insights for Christians seeking to come to terms with twentieth-century philosophy. I believed that a response to certain key twentieth-century thinkers informed by Van Til’s insights was just what was needed. Christopher Watkin has engaged in such a task—first with his *Jacques Derrida* volume, and now this *Michel Foucault* volume in the Great Thinkers series. Professor Watkin has spent a lot of time studying key Continental philosophers (including Foucault), and he has a good understanding of Reformed thought. Watkin brings these two worlds together in a great book. I hope he keeps writing, and I look forward to other volumes in the Great Thinkers series.”

—**Bradley G. Green**, Professor of Theological Studies,
Union University

“Christopher Watkin has been a valuable and reliable expositor of modern and postmodern thinking. The present volume on Foucault only adds to the growing list of his accomplishments. Not only is this volume in the Great Thinkers series a stellar addition, but it is engagingly written with ample illustrations that substantiate Foucault’s position among the forefront of apologists for postmodernism. Many strengths of Watkin’s analysis stand out. He clearly demonstrates how postmodernist epistemology supplants modern thinkers Descartes, Kant, and Hegel. But he also draws comparisons and contrasts with those whom I call the earliest postmodernists, such as Nietzsche and Marx. He also shows why Foucault rejects the concept of worldview despite

postmodern similarities with worldview thinking. Perhaps most valuable, as one would expect in this series, Watkin subjects both Foucault's ideas and similar biblical topics to clear analysis. He labors might and main to be fair to Foucault while comparing and contrasting his ideas with and to biblical passages. In so doing, Watkin reveals a distinctly Reformed perspective. Most impressive to me is his analysis of Foucault's distinction between autonomous and heteronomous transformation of the self. With helpful diagrams (which also appear throughout the text), Watkin shows how to avoid drawing a dichotomy between 'autonomous self-transformation' and 'pseudo-autonomous self-transformation.' Drawing on Pauline texts, Watkin proposes instead 'cruciform identity' and the Reformed perspective that retains both human responsibility ('work out your own salvation with fear and trembling') and God's sovereignty ('for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure'). I highly recommend this text."

—**W. Andrew Hoffecker**, Emeritus Professor of Church History, Reformed Theological Seminary

"Few Christians are familiar with Foucault. Even fewer actually engage (rather than accept or dismiss) his influential theses. That makes Chris Watkin's book essential reading. Sympathetically interpreting Foucault's basic program, Watkin shows how a Christian interpretation of reality is not only true but more persuasive. I highly recommend it."

—**Michael S. Horton**, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary California

"Chris Watkin has written a remarkable book—remarkable for its brevity, concision, accuracy, insight. This short introduction to Michel Foucault sets Foucault in his philosophical and historical

context, explains his main ideas and contributions, and shows what we can learn from him. Best of all for a Christian reader, Watkin assesses Foucault's strengths and flaws in the light of Scripture. This is the place to start for readers who want to know more about this massively influential thinker."

—**Peter J. Leithart**, President, Theopolis Institute for Biblical, Liturgical, and Cultural Studies, Birmingham, Alabama

"If you're not familiar with Michel Foucault, you should be. He is one of the most influential figures, if not the most influential figure, in contemporary Western culture. In this volume, Chris Watkin has accomplished what very few have even attempted. He walks us through the development of Foucault's points of view with expert care and clarity. He also compares and contrasts these outlooks with the teachings of the New Testament in ways that challenge followers of Christ to look afresh at some of their most basic commitments.

"As one who has been acquainted with the writings of Foucault, I've been waiting for a volume like this for decades. It is essential for Christian scholars in every discipline. It serves as an effective guide for Christian leaders and laypeople alike, as we seek to address the needs of the church and the unbelieving world today. If you haven't read it, you should—today."

—**Richard L. Pratt Jr.**, President, Third Millennium Ministries

"Foucault's thinking has seeped everywhere. This was brought home to me as I entered my son's room during his first term as an undergraduate to find books by Foucault and about Foucault. He was studying geography. As with Watkin's study on Derrida, the author is an expert guide in coming to grips with what Foucault was (and was not) saying about history, power, and identity. More importantly, he shows us how this hugely influential 'story' and

social theory both connect to and are confronted by the Christian ‘story’ and social theory in its cruciform shape. We desperately need these analyses. The gospel is big enough, true enough, and good enough to take every thought captive for Christ, and Watkin’s work is showing us the way. Highly recommended.”

—**Dan Strange**, Director, Oak Hill College

“Watkin has done it again! In less than a hundred and fifty pages of text, he has successfully laid out the core concerns—history, power, and identity—of one of the twentieth century’s leading postmodern presuppositionalists, Michel Foucault, and put them into constructive dialogue with the way that the apostle Paul treats these same three themes in the opening chapters of 1 Corinthians. This is a brilliant study of how the story, and wisdom, of the cross continues to confront, confound, and turn upside down the wisdom of this world.”

—**Kevin J. Vanhoozer**, Research Professor of Systematic Theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Praise for the Great Thinkers Series

“After a long eclipse, intellectual history is back. We are becoming aware, once again, that ideas have consequences. The importance of P&R Publishing’s leadership in this trend cannot be overstated. The series Great Thinkers: Critical Studies of Minds That Shape Us is a tool that I wish I had possessed when I was in college and early in my ministry. The scholars examined in this well-chosen group have shaped our minds and habits more than we know. Though succinct, each volume is rich, and displays a balance between what Christians ought to value and what they ought to reject. This is one of the happiest publishing events in a long time.”

—**William Edgar**, Professor of Apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary

“When I was beginning my studies of theology and philosophy during the 1950s and ’60s, I profited enormously from P&R’s Modern Thinkers Series. Here were relatively short books on important philosophers and theologians such as Nietzsche, Dewey, Van Til, Barth, and Bultmann, by scholars of Reformed conviction such as Clark, Van Riessen, Ridderbos, Polman, and Zuidema. These books did not merely summarize the work of these thinkers; they were serious critical interactions. Today, P&R is resuming and updating the series, now called Great Thinkers. The new books, on people such as Aquinas, Hume, Nietzsche, Derrida, and Foucault, are written by scholars who are experts on these writers. As before, these books are short—around 100 pages. They set forth accurately the views of the thinkers under consideration, and they enter into constructive dialogue, governed by biblical and Reformed convictions. I look forward to the release of all the books being planned and to the good influence they will have on the next generation of philosophers and theologians.”

—**John M. Frame**, Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy Emeritus, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

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GREAT THINKERS

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Series Editor

Nathan D. Shannon

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Christopher Watkin

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To all those for whom *audi alteram partem*
is a virtue, not a weakness

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

Amid the rise and fall of nations and civilizations, the influence of a few great minds has been profound. Some of these remain relatively obscure, even as their thought shapes our world; others have become household names. As we engage our cultural and social contexts as ambassadors and witnesses for Christ, we must identify and test against the Word those thinkers who have so singularly formed the present age.

The Great Thinkers series is designed to meet the need for critically assessing the seminal thoughts of these thinkers. Great Thinkers hosts a colorful roster of authors analyzing primary source material against a background of historical contextual issues, and providing rich theological assessment and response from a Reformed perspective.

Each author was invited to meet a threefold goal, so that each Great Thinkers volume is, first, *academically informed*. The brevity of Great Thinkers volumes sets a premium on each author's command of the subject matter and on the secondary discussions that have shaped each thinker's influence. Our authors identify the most influential features of their thinkers'

work and address them with precision and insight. Second, the series maintains a high standard of *biblical and theological faithfulness*. Each volume stands on an epistemic commitment to “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27), and is thereby equipped for fruitful critical engagement. Finally, Great Thinkers texts are *accessible*, not burdened with jargon or unnecessarily difficult vocabulary. The goal is to inform and equip the reader as effectively as possible through clear writing, relevant analysis, and incisive, constructive critique. My hope is that this series will distinguish itself by striking with biblical faithfulness and the riches of the Reformed tradition at the central nerves of culture, cultural history, and intellectual heritage.

Bryce Craig, president of P&R Publishing, deserves hearty thanks for his initiative and encouragement in setting the series in motion and seeing it through. Many thanks as well to P&R’s director of academic development, John Hughes, who has assumed, with cool efficiency, nearly every role on the production side of each volume. The Rev. Mark Moser carried much of the burden in the initial design of the series, acquisitions, and editing of the first several volumes. And the expert participation of Amanda Martin, P&R’s editorial director, was essential at every turn. I have long admired P&R Publishing’s commitment, steadfast now for over eighty-five years, to publishing excellent books promoting biblical understanding and cultural awareness, especially in the area of Christian apologetics. Sincere thanks to P&R, to these fine brothers and sisters, and to several others not mentioned here for the opportunity to serve as editor of the Great Thinkers series.

Nathan D. Shannon
Seoul, Korea

FOREWORD

It is the task of a foreword to commend a work to you, the reader, and to say why this work matters. I will endeavor to fulfill this task, one that is at once easy and somewhat difficult. It is easy because Christopher Watkin's Foucault is a highly commendable venture; it is difficult because our times, and the common configuration of our Christian practice within them, are disinclined to entertain such ventures.

We live in modernity, in the modern West. Modernism, the prevailing pattern of thought and culture beginning perhaps most obviously in the 1600s and still growing in trenchancy, strongly inclines us to the pragmatic and away from the useless. It deems philosophy and philosophical awareness useless, unpragmatic, and thus suspect. It imagines that it is something that one might opt out of. It blinds its children to the ironically philosophical nature of this claim. Modernism is a philosophical outlook that is compulsively antiphilosophical.

Modern Western Christian practice bears the same marks: we are pragmatic about the gospel and its dissemination. We can be something like the reverse of the emperor in his imagined

clothes: we imagine that we are free of philosophical commitments when all the while the child can plainly see that our very selves have been woven into the warp and woof of the philosophical fabric. Such Christians are disinclined even to open such a book as this. Or if we do, it is only to vindicate the Christian religion in rejection of the world.

But you have opened it! Good! Indeed, there should in fact be a deeper reality that is calling you; for there is one thing you need in order to be philosophical, and that is to be born. To be human is to ponder deep questions of wonder—something that dogs, for example, just don't do.

Also, you know that there are Christian doctrines that commend a wider outlook, a profounder grasp of life and thinking. To name a couple here: (1) To love God is also to love his works, and that includes the stuff of reality and our own times. God is Lord; humans are image-bearers. Although human personal and structural sin warps our understanding (case in point: modernism—thus it's worth joining Foucault in combating it), truth happens in every corner of the earth, and where it happens, it is the Lord's. (2) The gospel of Jesus Christ should be the transformative, subversive center of everything, even (especially) our deepest philosophical commitments. David Kettle, following in the missiological vision of Lesslie Newbigin, describes the gospel and conversion as the hospitable approach of God to “break in and break open” our world—what Watkin calls diagonalization and the cruciform reversal.¹ The gospel both honors the world and transforms it, welcoming it into its coming. These Christian truths situate and heighten the import of this little book on Michel Foucault, and the value (nonpragmatic—but pragmatic as well) of the listening to Foucault that it models and commends.

1. David J. Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context: Towards the Conversion of the West: Theological Bearings for Mission and Spirituality* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011).

Foucault, it turns out, voices modernism deeply, helping us to understand it and to humbly notice our own clothes. Give philosophical awareness a chance (philosophical friendship, too!), and you will find that you love it, and love it as loving God and his (also our) world.

Foucault understands and propounds some things about power in modernity: that it is pervasive, internalized, bodied, that it's really helpful to discern and be responsible about the power-knowledge connection, that it may not look like what we moderns have been touting, that our blindness typifies modernism, and that modernism needs to be subverted if we are going to survive.

I am an educator: the impinging world of my work is one of standards, assessments, data, scantrons with a-to-e options, and (most prized) results. No one, it can seem, even sees the actually pretty high-handed power nexus here. Only five options? Whose universe are scantron people in? Sadly, they are in the modernist one. Who determines what those five options are? How is it that we acquiesce blithely to such an anonymous, two-dimensional but commodifiable version of reality and of ourselves as educated?

I now make my home in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania. At one time, Pittsburgh was corporate capital of the world, and Aliquippa was home to the world's largest steel mill, sprawled seven miles along the Ohio River here. The stories of the mills are of vast wealth in exchange for personal bondage and addiction: a self-chosen participation in dangerous work, in which on-the-job deaths and disability were rationalized to be the price of progress.² Foucault somewhere argues that capitalism requires the kind of internalized discipline that typifies modernity.

2. I follow John Stanley, formerly of Uncommongrounds Café, a Church Army mission in Aliquippa, in comparing this favorably to Walter Brueggemann's account of the "royal consciousness" ascendant in Israel in Solomon's era, in his *Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

I am a woman. In my admittedly few PowerPoint slides devoted to Foucault in my humanities lecture on postmodern thought,³ I include (in addition to a photo of a panopticon, of a scantron, and of actor Jack Nicholson as Randle Patrick McMurphy in Miloš Forman's film of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*)⁴ a picture of Mammy tightening the strings of Scarlett O'Hara's corset as Scarlett grabs the bedpost and yells, "Tighter!"⁵ Surely such body-reshaping devices count as expressions of our willingness to conform our bodies to the power-laden ideals of the times. While we are at it, who is compelling so many people to live their lives en route to or from their body workouts?

Finally, of course, our lives on Facebook would offer supreme grist to the mill of Foucauldian analysis. *Mea culpa.*

The point is that Foucault helps us see what is there. It doesn't have to be all that is there (as per a reductivist account) to be worth understanding and understanding about ourselves and our time. It doesn't have to be an account that is free of a kind of base-level incoherence in order to be listened to—especially if the incoherence is noted to be endemic to the milieu that it voices and that we ourselves participate in (as I do Facebook). And especially if the incoherence itself cries out for diagonalizing resolution that only Christianity effects.

But in my humanities PowerPoint I also have a slide or two on Christianity and Pomo, including the matter of power. Christians of all people should understand in all humility the power-knowledge nexus, good and evil (discipleship, formation, justice [and injustice], mercy, also spiritual and psychological

3. I coordinate and team-teach in Geneva College's core course, Humanities 303.

4. Here I follow James K. A. Smith's choice of this film to epitomize Foucault's claims in chapter 4 of *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006).

5. *Gone with the Wind*, of course. 1939 film directed by Victor Fleming, from the book by Margaret Mitchell.

abuse, domestic violence, Black Lives Matter, and #MeToo), and the surpassing aptness of subversive game-changers (the cross).

So I myself have been pursuing Watkin's agenda, which he carries out admirably in this book. The agenda predates both of us by millennia. Early Christian believers read the pagan philosophers and said (something like), "Hey, this stuff is amazing!" They also said, "Hey, the Christian religion actually helps the pagan philosophers better their philosophy." Christianity makes for a better Platonism, a better Aristotelianism. This isn't meant as a contest, but as a dignity-conferring affirmation and consideration, and a generously hospitable collaboration. Truth is simple, but it's also more complex and profound and inexhaustive and objective than modernity has misled us to imagine.

As the Pevensies came to understand the existence of a deeper Magic, Scripture opens our eyes to a deeper power. "Something greater than Solomon is here" (Luke 11:31). It's a matter not of more power, but of power of a qualitatively different kind. It does not arm; it disarms—double meaning intended. Whatever the power of power in modernism, the power of Christ breaks in and breaks open, doing it transformatively, freely, better. One of my favorite parts of Watkin's treatise is his list of the Bible's reversals! "My soul doth magnify the Lord" (Luke 1:46 KJV)!

Victor Hugo understood this: *Les Miserables* famously begins with Jean Valjean's theft of the altar candlesticks. When police capture Valjean and force him before his "accuser," Bishop Myriel says to them, "You misunderstood—I gave them to him." Myriel understands that this courageous gesture of regard and love so subverts Valjean's being that his soul has now been claimed for God. Our lives may be blessed to be agents of such subversions! As Watkin clearly understands and models, one key subversion is to listen and therein accord dignity to the other. Truth must be invited hospitably. In fact, don't you see how just

this little assertion gently and winsomely disarms the internalized dominance nexus that typifies modernity?

Take up and read. Follow Christopher Watkin's good example of listening, having your eyes opened, deepening your philosophical awareness and your sense of the gospel, your own need of it, and the strategically joyous gesture it is in our time. Jesus is the answer to your sins; he's also the subversively healing answer to modernism—yours along with everyone else's.

Esther Lightcap Meek
Professor of Philosophy, Geneva College
Aliquippa, Pennsylvania
September 2018

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My warm thanks also to the students who took part in the 2017 MOOC "Postmodernism and the Bible: Derrida and Foucault." Your questions, comments, and conversations helped me to refine my thinking, both about Foucault and about the Bible, and I am thrilled at the way you threw yourselves into the intellectual exchange. Chapeau!

For your encouragement, incisive questions, careful reading, and wise counsel, Alison, thank you. You have my unending love and admiration.

ABBREVIATIONS

ABHS	“About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of Self: Two Lectures at Dartmouth”
AK	<i>The Archaeology of Knowledge</i>
BC	<i>The Birth of the Clinic</i>
DP	<i>Discipline and Punish</i>
ECS	“The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” in <i>The Final Foucault</i>
EW1-EST	<i>The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984</i> , vol. 1, <i>Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth</i>
EW2-AME	<i>The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984</i> , vol. 2, <i>Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology</i>
EW3-P	<i>The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984</i> , vol. 3, <i>Power</i>
FL	<i>Foucault Live</i>
FR	<i>The Foucault Reader</i>
GS	“The Gay Science”
HM	<i>History of Madness</i>

HS1	<i>The History of Sexuality, vol. 1, An Introduction</i>
HS2	<i>The History of Sexuality, vol. 2, The Use of Pleasure</i>
HS3	<i>The History of Sexuality, vol. 3, The Care of the Self</i>
LCF-A	<i>Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974–1975: Abnormal</i>
LCF-BBP	<i>Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979: The Birth of Biopolitics</i>
LCF-CT	<i>Lectures at the Collège de France, 1983–1984: The Courage of Truth (The Government of Self and Others II)</i>
LCF-PP	<i>Lectures at the Collège de France, 1973–1974: Psychiatric Power</i>
LCF-SMD	<i>Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76: Society Must Be Defended</i>
LCF-STP	<i>Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–1978: Security, Territory, Population</i>
LCF-WK	<i>Lectures at the Collège de France, 1970–1971: The Will to Know</i>
LCP	<i>Language, Counter-Memory, Practice</i>
OT	<i>The Order of Things</i>
P/K	<i>Power/Knowledge</i>
PPC	<i>Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984</i>
PSD	“Politics and the Study of Discourse,” in <i>The Foucault Effect</i>
RM	<i>Remarks on Marx</i>
TPS	“Truth, Power, Self: An Interview with Michel Foucault,” in <i>Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault</i>

INTRODUCTION

By one 2016 measure,⁶ Michel Foucault is the all-time most-cited author across every academic discipline from fine arts to hard science, with over a quarter more citations than his nearest rival⁷ and leaving in his wake figures like Freud, Marx, and Einstein. Whatever measure is used, it is beyond doubt that his influence in the arts, humanities, and beyond is equal to or greater than that of any other twentieth-century figure. His reach is as broad as it is deep: the Library of Congress Online Catalog lists 1,299 books partially or wholly on Foucault, including titles such as *Foucault and Law*, *Foucault and Geography*, *Foucault and Classical Antiquity*, *Foucault and Education*, *Foucault and Fiction*, *Foucault and Religion*, and *Foucault and Aging*. With the publication of the volume you are currently reading, there will soon be one more

6. See “1360 Highly Cited Researchers ($h>100$) according to their Google Scholar Citations public profiles,” available at <http://www.webometrics.info/en/node/58>. Data was collected during the third week of August 2016 of a BETA list of the public profiles of the most highly cited researchers (h -index larger than 100) according to their declared presence in the Google Scholar Citations database.

7. Pierre Bourdieu, in case you are wondering.

Foucault book on library shelves. So it behooves us to begin with the question: does the world really need yet another book on Foucault?

Well, yes it does—not because I have some startling new aspect of Foucault’s thought to reveal, nor because I have discovered some long-lost manuscripts of his, but because the project of this book—to bring Foucault’s thought into conversation with the Bible and Reformed theology—is both new and important. It is new because, as I explain below,⁸ there have been many theological engagements with Foucault, but none of the sort that I am attempting here: to bring his thought into direct conversation with relevant biblical passages on the questions of history, power, and identity, and to compare the approach to those themes taken by Foucault and by Reformed biblical exegesis. This task is important because it reveals that Foucault and the Bible are fundamentally at variance in their assumptions, yet have a great deal in common.

One of the most striking similarities between Foucault and Reformed thought is methodological: no twentieth-century thinker does more than Foucault to unearth the conventions and commonplaces of our modern world, and the “presuppositional” tradition of Reformed apologetics likewise works hard to interrogate and expose the hidden assumptions undergirding modern thought. In the pages that follow, we will see affinities between Foucault and a Reformed understanding of the Bible in their respective views of history, in their critique of power, and in their construction of identity. We will also see, without cancelling out or minimizing these affinities, that Foucault and a Reformed understanding of the Bible have contrasting assumptions that subtend their commonalities. In the final analysis, I shall argue that Foucault and the Bible share a set

8. See “Interlude: Foucault and the Theologians.”

of common concerns and problems to which they offer analogous but distinct responses, and that the Bible's responses tend on the whole to be more complex and multidimensional than Foucault's.

In attempting to strike up a conversation between Foucault and the Bible, it is important to respect, in each case, the kind of texts we are dealing with. So how should we characterize Foucault's writing? Well, here are three words to get us going: "Foucault writes stories." This, in part, accounts for him often being classed as a historian. His training, however, was in philosophy and psychiatry. That, in part, explains why many traditional historians reject his historical method. He writes stories, rather than, for example, elaborating philosophical theories in a systematic way or writing about a particular historical moment in isolation from its historical context. Foucault defends his stories as history, but he does not write them simply because they are history, nor does he simply repudiate the accusation that they are fictions:

It seems to me that the possibility exists for fiction to function in truth, for a fictional discourse to induce effects of truth, and for bringing it about that a true discourse engenders or "manufactures" something that does not as yet exist, that is, "fictions" it. (P/K, 193)

He is right, is he not? Are not Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* just as influential in shaping the West as Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* or Plato's *Republic*, if not more so? Cannot myths, if believed, shape an individual and even a civilization, regardless of whether they are "true" in the sense of accurately representing a state of affairs in the world? The real world is built of such fictions, only some of which are "true" in the way we usually understand that term. So perhaps we can characterize

Foucault's thought, in a preliminary way, as an exploration of stories and world-making.

If this is how Foucault writes, then we need to follow his stories if we are to understand his thought. For this reason, it does not cut with the grain of Foucault's way of writing to structure this book around certain prominent Foucauldian sayings or "quotable quotes," as was my démarche in the Derrida volume in this Great Thinkers series. For the same reasons, it will not do either to bring Foucault's stories into conversation with isolated biblical verses or doctrines. That would be like comparing apples and the social history of the orange. We need to bring stories into conversation with stories, and bring the narratives that Foucault tells of our modern world into conversation with the narratives that the Bible tells about God, humanity, and history. Therefore, of all the different structures and approaches that a book such as this could take, I choose to focus on the biblical story of the incarnation, cross, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. This, of course, leaves much unsaid, but it is my hope that it will ensure that what is said can afford reasonable comparisons with the genre, as well as the content, of Foucault's thought.

The present book is divided into two parts, each with three chapters. Part 1 offers a synoptic summary of Foucault's thought, roughly divided into the commonly accepted periods of his work: archaeological, genealogical, and ethical. Within each period, I focus in turn on a dominant theme: history, power, and identity. In the three chapters of Part 2, then, I unfold a biblical account of the same themes, striking up a conversation with Foucault as I go. I hope that the diagrams I use throughout the book make this conversation easier to follow, both for those with little previous knowledge of Foucault and for those with no intimate acquaintance with the Bible. In the same way that this book seeks to lay a table at which both Foucault and the Bible can dine without denying either their differences or their

affinities, I hope that both nonreligious Foucault scholars and Christians who are skeptical of Foucault will find in these pages a faithful and honest reflection of their own position and an open invitation to dialogue with an outlook that may initially appear to them as peculiar, objectionable, or hostile.

PART 1

FOUCAULT'S THOUGHT

1

HISTORY AND TRUTH

I am going to tell you a story, after which I will invite you to reflect on what you make of it. It is a true story, and it takes place in Paris in 1797, fewer than ten years after the storming of the Bastille and the social upheaval that followed. Its hero is a physician and psychiatrist called Philippe Pinel, “physician of the infirmaries” at the Bicêtre Hospital in Paris, an institution whose diverse inmates include criminals, those with physical diseases, pensioners, and the mentally ill. The story begins when Pinel notices that members of the latter group are forced to sleep upright, restrained with iron cuffs and collars, on chains a little too short to permit them to lie down. During their waking hours they are treated as animals and periodically put on show to satisfy the curiosity of Parisian visitors.

The climax of the story (I am telling you the short version) is straightforward enough and told often enough in histories of medicine and psychiatry: in a moment of epochal humanitarian progress, Pinel frees the mad of the Bicêtre from their barbarous chains.¹ It is remembered as a revolutionary gesture,

1. This act may have been accomplished by his predecessor as governor of the

immortalized by Charles Louis Müller in a painting of 1849 that hangs today in the entrance hall of the Académie Nationale de Médecine in Paris.² In Pinel's own words:

To detain maniacs in constant seclusion, and to load them with chains; to leave them defenseless, . . . to rule them with a rod of iron, as if to shorten the term of an existence considered miserable, is a system of superintendence more distinguished for its convenience than for its humanity or its success. Experience proves that acute mania, especially when periodical, may be frequently cured by measures of mildness and moderate coercion, conjoined to a proper attention to the state of the mind.³

So then, what do you think of Pinel's reforms? Humanitarian? Undoubtedly. Ground-breaking? Certainly. Progress? Categorically. Pinel is almost universally hailed as a moral example, a liberator, and a humanitarian. The *Oxford Illustrated Companion to Medicine* trumpets him as one who “defied both the French public and the Revolutionary Government by unlocking the chains of his patients and prohibiting other barbaric methods” and who “introduced a raft of innovations, all designed to bring a semblance of gentleness and friendliness into their hitherto sordid lives.”⁴

Bicêtre, Jean-Baptiste Pussin, as most now think. See K. W. M. Fulford et al., eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Psychiatry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 207–9.

2. Charles Louis Müller, *Philippe Pinel fait enlever les fers aux aliénés de Bicêtre en 1792* [Philippe Pinel has the mad freed from their chains at Bicêtre in 1792], 1852, oil on canvas, Académie Nationale de Médecine, Paris.

3. Quoted in Jan Ehrenwald, ed., *The History of Psychotherapy: From Healing Magic to Encounter* (London: Jason Aronson, 1991), 217.

4. Stephen Lock et al., eds., *The Oxford Illustrated Companion to Medicine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 75.

I am now going to ask you some very silly questions, but I beg you to indulge me and take it seriously: why do you think Pinel's reforms represent "progress"? Why do you think the former regime was "barbarous," and why do you think that removing chains from the mad at the Hôpital Bicêtre should be considered a "liberation"? Once your indignation has subsided that these questions can even be raised, think how you would offer a reasoned answer. What do you need to believe about the nature of madness, about human beings, about historical progress, and about the purposes of restraint for your reaction to be as self-evident to you as it is? And, if I may stretch your patience a little further, if you had other assumptions, might you not take a very different view, with equally strident certainty? Might there be a bigger story to tell than one of straightforward progress from barbarity to humanity?

Enter Foucault—not to argue that the former regime of chains and bestial treatment was better than Pinel's reforms, but precisely to tell this bigger story, a story that explains, not merely Pinel's heroism, but why it is that we should think him a hero today at all, why the mad were ever incarcerated to begin with, and what we are taking for granted when we talk about ideas like "progress." Foucault's aim in retelling Pinel's story—which he does in the course of *History of Madness*—is not to prove that progress or humanitarianism is meaningless, but to encourage an awareness of the nature and origin of the assumptions that stand behind the reasons we offer when forced to justify them, and to show that it could have been otherwise. Before we are in a position to appreciate what Foucault is doing with Pinel in particular, however, we need a sense of how he approaches history in general, and it is to that task that we now turn.

History: Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche

If we had to sum up Foucault’s approach to history in the shortest possible formula, we could do worse than to say that he sides with Nietzsche, Bachelard, and Canguilhem against Hegel and Marx. In the rest of this chapter, I will try to explain the meaning of that condensed statement. The early nineteenth-century German philosopher Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel (1770–1831) elaborated a philosophy of history that has transformed the way we think as much as any other philosophical system since Plato’s. For our purposes here, the key terms in Hegel’s understanding of history are “consciousness,” “progress,” and “totality.” Hegel sees history as the grand story of “mind” or “spirit” (*Geist* in German), gradually coming to a consciousness of its own freedom. By *Geist* he means something like independent human subjectivities united in relation to each other in a particular society. One implication of Hegel’s account, therefore, is that if we leave human consciousness out of the equation, we can never come to an adequate understanding of history. Consciousness is central to Hegel’s view of history.

In order to trace how *Geist* progressively comes to a realization of its own nature, Hegel tells a story that runs from the very first ancient civilizations to his own day. The story is one of inexorable progress, but that progress is not linear. It follows a three-stage process that has come to be called “dialectic”:

1. The stage of “understanding.” Two concepts are accepted as fixed and mutually exclusive. For example, “being” and “nonbeing”: something cannot both be and not be at the same time.
2. The stage of “dialectical reason.” The concepts are seen to harbor contradictions. For example, if “being” and

“nonbeing” are absolute, how can anything ever come into being or cease to be?

3. The stage of “speculation” or “sublation.”⁵ The two categories from the stage of understanding are “sublated” or “passed over,” and a new, higher category embraces them and resolves the apparent contradiction uncovered at stage 2. For example, “becoming” embraces both “being” and “nonbeing,” and accounts for the seeming contradiction between those two lower categories.

So whereas linear progress advances in a straight line from A to B, dialectical progress advances from A and B to C. The three stages are sometimes labelled “thesis,” “antithesis,” and “synthesis,” but Hegel uses these terms only in his critique of Kant, never in relation to his own thinking. For our purposes in this book, the main point we need to take away from Hegel’s dialectical understanding of history is that historical progress, whatever its precise nature, is inexorable and inevitable: the dialectical movement rolls onward just as surely as objects fall downward, and the whole of world history is moving toward a particular goal, namely the self-realization of *Geist*.

So far, we have seen that Hegel’s account of history privileges consciousness and includes a notion of inexorable progress over time. A final aspect of his thinking that we need to be familiar with before we move on to Foucault is that no development is left outside the dialectical movement: everything that happens in history can be understood in terms of the grand story of *Geist*’s self-realization, with no remainder. Hegel’s philosophy seeks to account for the totality of human history, not for this or that isolated civilization or century.

5. Sublation, for Hegel (German: *Aufhebung*), draws together a complex set of meanings and is notoriously hard to define. To cut to the chase, we can think of it as resolution of contradiction in a higher unity.

Marx, for his part, adopts the basic scaffolding of Hegel's philosophy of history—the idea that history is inevitably progressing toward a particular goal—but he gets rid of the idea of *Geist* in favor of a “dialectical materialism” that focuses not on human consciousness but on economic conditions. History can still be understood as progress toward an inevitable goal, but that goal is now understood as the proletarian revolution that, in time, will usher in the classless society.

Foucault's understanding of history, to begin with, is a rejection of Hegel and Marx in the three key areas of consciousness, progress, and totality:

- For Foucault, human consciousness is not at the center of history. Traditional historiography gravitates to history's big names like Galileo, Descartes, or Martin Luther King, seeing these august figures as the primary agents of historical development. Foucault dismisses this sort of history as “doxology,” an unwarranted genuflection at the altar of the “great men” of the past. He takes us to a level more fundamental than the sayings and actions of great men, a level he calls a “positive unconscious of knowledge” (*OT*, xi), which we shall explore at length below. In fact, great women and men play a rather peripheral role for Foucault, and the main historical actors are concepts, not people. The philosophical landscape of Foucault's day was divided between the philosophers of consciousness (primarily Sartre and the existentialists), and the philosophers of the concept (Gaston Bachelard and Georges Canguilhem). Foucault sides squarely with the philosophers of the concept.
- Foucault rejects the idea that history should be understood in terms of inexorable, cumulative, and irreversible progress from one age to the next, and he rejects the idea

that history is moving ever closer to a particular, predetermined goal. Dismissive of Hegel's and Marx's claims to have provided a convincing account of historical progress, he quipped that "Marxism exists in nineteenth-century thought as a fish exists in water; that is, it ceases to breathe anywhere else" (*OT*, 285). In his systematic rejection of Hegel, Foucault substantially aligns himself with the approach to history taken by the nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche—or at least with Foucault's own reading of Nietzsche.⁶ Against the traditional way in which history seeks to explain continuities over time and seeks to account for how one thing led to another, Foucault's Nietzsche rejects the "antiquarian history" that consists in establishing continuities from one event to the next, opposing it to his own "genealogy" or "effective history," the purpose of which "is not to discover the roots of our identity, but to commit itself to its dissipation" as it labors to "make visible all of those discontinuities that cross us" (*LCP*, 162). Nietzsche's genealogical method seeks to sniff out history's false universals (such as "rationality")—notions that are presented as eternal and natural, but which in fact are confined within particular cultures and often serve the interests of a given culture's dominant groups (*LCP*, 158). Bachelard and Canguilhem, working on the history of science, similarly saw the ideas of Einstein not as a gradual progression from what had come before, but as an abrupt and dramatic rupture,⁷ and

6. Foucault's reading of Nietzsche is disputed by much Nietzsche scholarship. See, for example, Keith Ansell-Pearson, "Introduction: On Nietzsche's Critique of Morality," in *"On the Genealogy of Morality" and Other Writings*, by Friedrich Nietzsche, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), xx.

7. See, for example, Gaston Bachelard, *The New Scientific Spirit*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 54.

from such ruptures developed an understanding of history as a succession of epistemological breaks. History had always included discussion of ruptures and discontinuities, but for Nietzsche, Bachelard, and Canguilhem, they were placed for the first time at its center.

- Foucault's histories do not assume that the stories they tell are the only possible ones or the ones that account for all historical details. As we shall see below, Foucault's main aim is not to be comprehensive and total, but to tell stories that highlight certain features of society and, especially in his later writing, achieve certain political ends. Like Nietzsche, Bachelard, and Canguilhem, Foucault privileges difference over similarity, arguing that "the freeing of difference requires thought without contradiction, without dialectics, without negation; thought that accepts divergence" (*LCP*, 185). He does not think that any account of history can or should pretend to totality: no story can be the story of everything, and we must content ourselves to tell local and limited histories confined to particular aspects of particular historical ages. Furthermore, we must tell those stories, not in terms of ideas that remain unchanged from one age to the next (which he calls "anthropological universals," *EW2-AME*, 461), but in terms of ruptures and interruptions.

The focus of Foucault's history, then, is not on how we move from one historical period to another, but on what it is about historical periods that makes them truly different in the first place. Foucault approaches history as a series of discrete snapshots, not as a movie with a scrupulous continuity editor. So the question we now need to ask of Foucault's thought is: what does a history that rejects consciousness, progress, and totality look like?

Archaeology and Epistemes

Two broad theoretical terms will help us to answer this question, and they will act as signposts along our route through the first period of Foucault's work: "archaeology" and "episteme."

Archaeology

Foucault's historical method—implicit in *History of Madness* (1961) and explicitly called "archaeology" in *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), *The Order of Things* (1966), and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969)—does not begin at thirty thousand feet with grand stories like the rise and fall of nations, or with universal concepts like empire, *Geist*, or destiny. It begins on the ground, scrutinizing particular forms of behavior:

Instead of deducing concrete phenomena from universals, or instead of starting with universals as an obligatory grid of intelligibility for certain concrete practices, I would like to start with these concrete practices and, as it were, pass these universals through the grid of these practices. (*LCF-BBP*, 3)

Consistent with Foucault's rejection of Hegelian history, archaeology does not concern itself with the intentions and actions of human beings, but with the rules that govern what can and cannot be said and accepted at a particular moment in history—rules that operate below the level of consciousness. Whereas traditional history might concern itself with *what was said* at particular historical moments (e.g., Julius Caesar declares, "I came, I saw, I conquered," or Martin Luther King proclaims from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, "I have a dream"), Foucault focuses rather on *what could have been said* at a particular time: what it was possible, thinkable, or permitted to say.

The rules governing such possibilities are never explicit in the

historical moment in which they operate, but they are assumed unquestioningly (and most often unconsciously) by those who live in it. This is why Foucault can say that archaeology studies “the unthought” of an epoch (see *OT*, 351–58). Furthermore, these “rules” or “laws” are not written down and policed, like a penal code. They are not rules like “Do not murder,” but more like “When I speak without coercion, the thoughts I express are my own.” These rules are so fundamental to the way that we live, experience the world and interact with others, that we would have a very hard time conceiving that things could possibly be otherwise. It is not correct to say that we “obey” these rules in any conscious sense, nor that we recognize them as limiting us. On the contrary, we need to presuppose them in order to make sense of anything, to do anything meaningful, or to produce what we call “truth.”

This focus on the assumptions necessary for meaningful speech and action situates Foucault in proximity to Immanuel Kant, but at the same time significantly distant from him. It is a proximity and distance worth noting with particular care, because the ways in which Foucault departs from Kant are very important for coming to terms with his archaeological method. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant claims to set down the “conditions of possibility” for our thinking: the categories in terms of which anything that we can think must be thought. There are twelve such categories for Kant: unity, plurality, totality, reality, negation, limitation, inherence and subsistence, causality and dependence, community, possibility, existence, and necessity. Kant calls these the “*a priori*” conditions of thought, meaning that they are in place before we think or observe anything at all, and without them we could not make sense of anything. For Kant, these *a priori* conditions are unchanging; they are the same for us as they were for our earliest ancestors, and they will remain until the final generation of our descendants.

While Foucault agrees with Kant that there are conditions

shaping what can be thought, he differs crucially from Kant when he maintains that these conditions can change over time. What it was possible meaningfully to think in thirteenth-century Paris is not the same as what it is possible meaningfully to think in twenty-first century Paris. Hence, Foucault speaks of the “historical *a priori*” (*AK*, 126–31). As Jeffrey Nealon points out in his treatment of this term, “historical *a priori*” captures something of the tension and complexity of Foucault’s thought: archaeology is objective insofar as it seeks to discern the *a priori* conditions of thought in a particular period, but it is relative insofar as its *a priori* is historical.⁸ We shall return to this delicate juxtaposition of the relative and the objective more than once in this book.

Epistemes

Foucault introduces the term “episteme” in *The Order of Things* to describe the most important rules governing the formation of ideas in a given historical context. He describes the term in the following way:

What I am attempting to bring to light is the epistemological field, the *episteme* in which knowledge, envisaged apart from all criteria having reference to its rational value or to its objective forms, grounds its positivity and thereby manifests a history which is not that of its growing perfection, but rather that of its conditions of possibility. . . . Such an enterprise is not so much a history, in the traditional meaning of that word, as an “archaeology.” (*OT*, xxiii–xxiv)

An *episteme*, then, is an “epistemological field,” a space in which knowledge can be produced according to particular rules.

8. Jeffrey T. Nealon, “Historical *a Priori*,” in *The Cambridge Foucault Lexicon*, ed. Leonard Lawlor and John Nale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 200–206.

Although there is some disagreement in the secondary literature about whether epistemes can coexist, in *The Order of Things* Foucault indicates that each historical epoch has one (and only one) episteme (*OT*, 168), stretching across all academic disciplines as well as conditioning everyday thought.

All of this makes an episteme sound very much like a worldview, but it is a comparison that Foucault resists. As a good anti-Hegelian, he rejects the unifying and totalizing notion of worldview, insisting in the lecture “Politics and the Study of Discourse” that “I do not seek to detect . . . the unitary spirit of an epoch” and that “the episteme is not a sort of grand underlying theory, it is a space of dispersion, it is an open and doubtless indefinitely describable field of relationships” (*PSD*, 55) between different discourses. Epistemes serve not to integrate but to disperse, and “archaeological comparison does not have a unifying, but a diversifying, effect” (*AK*, 160). To use a rather crude and approximate electronic metaphor to sit alongside Foucault’s own images of an “intellectual unconscious” and “historical a priori,” we might say that, whereas traditional history concerns itself with the software that happens to be running in a particular epoch, Foucault investigates the capabilities and limits of the underlying programming language. Whereas the episteme (programming language) sets the conditions of what can and cannot be thought and said, actual statements (software) are a record of what has in fact been said.

In a moment, we shall take a look at *History of Madness* in more detail, but first of all it will be useful to familiarize ourselves with Foucault’s archaeological method by setting out his broad understanding of the three historical epistemes that he considers in *The Order of Things*: Renaissance, Classical, and modern.

The Renaissance Episteme

The episteme of the Renaissance (fifteenth-century Florence to seventeenth-century Europe) is characterized by similitude,

affinities, and correspondences. Of primary importance to the Renaissance way of understanding the world is that different parts of the universe resemble and correspond to each other in fundamental ways. Foucault uses the rather charming example of aconite, a dark-blue flowering plant, the seeds of which “are tiny dark globes set in white skin-like coverings whose appearance is much like that of eyelids covering an eye” (*OT*, 30–31). For the Renaissance mind, this resemblance between aconite and the eye is no coincidence: the correspondence indicates an affinity, which means that the plant can be used to cure ocular diseases. In a similar way, it is no surprise for the Renaissance mind, nor mere poetic conceit, that the night of Banquo’s murder in *Macbeth* should be accompanied by stormy weather. Duncan’s attendant Lennox describes the night of the murder in the following terms:

LENNOX: Where we lay,
Our chimneys were blown down and, as they say,
Lamentings heard i’ th’ air, strange screams of death,
And prophesying with accents terrible
Of dire combustion and confused events
New hatched to th’woeful time.⁹

It is quite understandable for Lennox and the other characters that there should be a causal connection between a disturbance in the social order (Banquo’s murder) and the natural order (the violent wind), just as there is an affinity between aconite and the eye.

The Classical Episteme

Around the middle of the seventeenth century, the Renaissance episteme comes to an end. Foucault does not tell

9. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 2.3.43–51.

us why, for he is writing a Nietzschean history of ruptures, not a Hegelian history of continuity and progress. The Classical episteme no longer understands the world in terms of similitude and affinity, but in terms of representation, taxonomy, and mathematical calculation. The world is no longer to be interpreted (as, for example, in the case of aconite and the eye), but measured and classified. Language, which for the Renaissance episteme was an autonomous reality that participated in the same similitudes and correspondences as everything else, now becomes external to things. The relation between language and the world is no longer a natural one; rather, language is now assumed to explain things from a distance, imitating them more or less accurately. For this new, Classical episteme, to conceive of something is to represent it in the mind, a paradigm epitomized in Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*: "I am thinking, therefore I exist."

The transition from the Renaissance to the Classical episteme is captured for Foucault in Miguel de Cervantes's 1615 novel *Don Quixote*. The eponymous knight errant sets out on a quest, expecting to discover resemblances and correspondences between the heroic tales of chivalry he has read and the countryside in which he travels, but instead he finds himself in a world of measurement and representation, stripped of the romance and interconnectedness that the Renaissance episteme affords.

The Modern Episteme

Foucault discerns a further epistemic shift around the beginning of the nineteenth century, this time from the Classical to the modern. The rupture is characterized by a growing understanding of the limits of Classical representation. The Classical age thought that language and measurement could adequately represent the world (in terms of Descartes' *cogito*, it thought that the "I am thinking" could adequately represent the "I" that exists), but the modern age begins to see that reality cannot adequately

be thus represented. In the same way that Foucault locates Cervantes at the hinge of the Renaissance and the Classical, he situates artist Diego Velázquez and author the Marquis de Sade on the cusp of the modern.

Foucault devotes the first section of *The Order of Things* to Velázquez's painting *Las Meninas*, insisting that, when viewing this canvas, the gallery visitor cannot place herself in any position that makes comprehensive sense of its lines of perspective and reflections, with the result that "no gaze is stable" (OT, 5). This would not have been a problem for the Classical age, Foucault argues, as it did not consider the way in which reflecting upon the position of the viewing subject complicates what is being



Fig. 1.1. Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas* [*The Ladies-in-Waiting*], 1656, oil on canvas, 318 cm × 276 cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid.

viewed; it is only in the modern episteme that the one for whom the world is represented is called into question. Indeed, the subject (and “man” more broadly) comes to the fore in the modern episteme such that Foucault can famously say, in the final section of *The Order of Things*, that “man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end” (*OT*, 422).

The appearance of “man” in the modern age can also be seen, for Foucault, in Kant’s categories of the understanding, sketched above. For Kant, it is the human subject who shapes and gives content to reality, rather than merely representing it. As for Sade, his attempts to capture erotic excess are “no longer the ironic triumph of representation over resemblance,” but rather “the obscure and repeated violence of desire battering at the limits of representation” (*OT*, 288). With Sade, we see language finding its limits, grasping at that which it cannot represent, and therefore becoming a problem in a way that was not evident in the Classical age. This parallels the way in which Velázquez shows us the limitations of the viewing subject, making the subject of representation a problem in a way in which it previously was not.

Language in the modern age once more became autonomous. Rather than merely imitating reality, as it did in the Classical age, the nineteenth century sees language not as a window through which we can see reality, but as a medium that always leaves a remainder when it tries to capture the meaning of the world. The “dark, concave, inner side” (*OT*, 258) of representation takes on great importance. The Cartesian *cogito* also loses its transparency and self-evidence in the modern age: the symmetry between “I am thinking” and “I exist” is broken, and I can no longer know myself apart from the shadows and opacities of the unthought. Foucault remains silent on the question of what might succeed the modern episteme, hinting only that Nietzsche is the one who can lead us beyond it.

***History of Madness* (1961)¹⁰**

It is now time to engage more closely with one of the major texts from the early period of Foucault's writing in order to acquaint ourselves with some of the characteristic moves and positions of his thought. In *History of Madness*,¹¹ Foucault implicitly follows what he would later call his archaeological method to analyze the history of madness in the West from the Renaissance to the modern day. Before we look at the book in detail, let us spend an important moment considering in broad terms what *History of Madness* is about and, equally importantly, what it is not about. *History of Madness* is not the history of the asylum. Nor is it about an ahistorical, universal, overarching reality that is called "madness" in one age, "unreason" in another, and "mental illness" in a third. This would be too much of a continuous, totalizing, Hegelian understanding of history for Foucault's Nietzschean sensibilities. What Foucault is seeking to write is a history of concepts, behaviors, and practices—different ways in which "madness" has been understood and dealt with in the modern West. In line with his commitment to begin, not with universal ideas, but with particular behaviors and practices, Foucault rejects the idea that madness is an ahistorical given that transcends different epochs—periods that in some later works he will call epistemes. As he later explained, looking back at *History of Madness*: "If we suppose that it [i.e., a universal, ahistorical concept of madness] does not exist, then what can history

10. Foucault's *Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* was originally published in 1961. A version with a new preface and two appendices was brought out with the title *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* in 1972, from which the English translation *History of Madness* is taken.

11. The French title of the 1972 revised edition of the text is *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*. This poses a problem for English translators, because "folie" has a broad semantic range, translating both the "madness" of the Shakespearean fool and the "insanity" of modern medicine.

make of these different events and practices which are apparently organized around something that is supposed to be madness?" (*LCF-BBP*, 3).

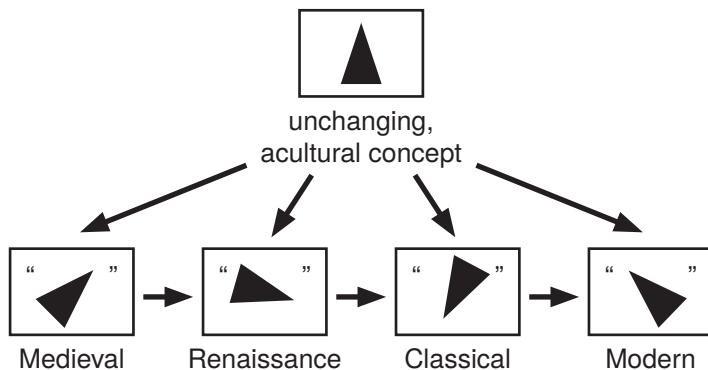


Fig. 1.2. Foucault does not conceive of the history of madness in terms of particular, historically and culturally limited ways of referring to overarching and essentially unchanging concepts outside of culture and time.

It will not simply do, however, to get rid of the overarching concept in order to leave a succession of historically limited notions:

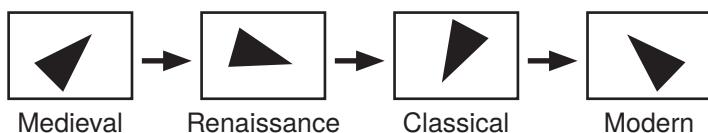


Fig. 1.3. Foucault does not conceive of the history of madness in terms of a succession of discrete and equivalent individual concepts, historically and culturally bound.

The problem with this model is that it assumes that these terms can be understood apart from the broader historical moment

in which they arise. It treats them as atomistic meanings that can be isolated, captured, and individually pinned by the historical lepidopterist. This approach assumes that “madness,” for example, occupies the same conceptual space for one historical period as “mental illness” does for another, which is precisely the sort of universalism that Foucault wants to contest. The whole point of the archaeological method is not to take these terms out of their original contexts, but to see how they function in relation to other concepts within their cultural-historical moment:¹²

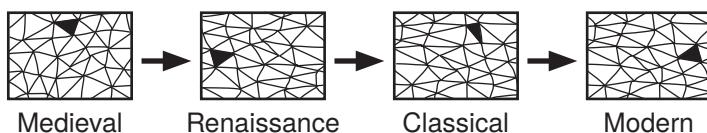


Fig. 1.4. The concepts in a particular historical period can only be understood in relation to other concepts in that period, and do not necessarily have direct and exact equivalents in other periods.

With this understanding of the nature and importance of historical ways of thinking (later to be called “epistemes”) in place, let us now go on to see how Foucault tells the story of madness.

Renaissance Madness

Before the Renaissance, Foucault argues, madness was not treated as a distinct category; it was not the negation or opposite of reason, but one among many possibilities of human experience, occupying a “liminal situation . . . in medieval society”

12. This is one of the reasons that Foucault has frequently been branded a structuralist. It is a label he sometimes embraced, sometimes repudiated. For an excellent discussion of Foucault’s complex relation to the label “structuralism,” see Patrick Singy, “Structuralism,” in *The Cambridge Foucault Lexicon*, ed. Lawlor and Nale, 490–95.

(HM, 11). Foucault's story really starts with the Renaissance. Indeed, he begins the opening chapter of *History of Madness* with a discussion of a striking image that "made its appearance in the imaginary landscape of the Renaissance" and soon "occupied a privileged place there" (HM, 8): the highly symbolic "ship of fools" (*stultifera navis*). Ships of fools, says Foucault, sailed around medieval Europe with their singular cargo, namely "the senseless in search of their reason" (HM, 10).

Foucault does not begin *History of Madness* by discussing the ship of fools simply to grab the reader's attention (though it certainly does that). He is signaling his anti-Hegelian archaeological method: he begins, not with overarching theories or concepts, but with particular behaviors and practices. He begins, as it were, at ground level and only afterward works up to a more general understanding of a historical period.

During the Renaissance, Foucault says, madness was thought to play a subversive role in society. It taught an instructive lesson about the future overturning of the established order (in this case, the order of reason) in God's final judgment at the end of time, and the ships of fools sailed around Europe as "a paradise regained of sorts, as men once more become strangers to necessity and want, yet without a return to a state of innocence" (HM, 20). The mad were seen to mock the fragility of human reason and to carry a strange wisdom, the wisdom that falls from the mouth of fools in Shakespeare's plays: Feste in *Twelfth Night*, the Fool in *King Lear*, or Hamlet himself.

Classical Madness: The Great Confinement

The term most characteristic of madness in the Classical age for Foucault is "the great confinement": the internment of the mad in hospitals and former lazarus houses (institutions for the care of lepers). The Classical age no longer considered madness a source of wisdom or an eschatological subversion of reason,

nor was it thought to yield any pedagogical benefit for the sane. Madness also lost the theological significance it held during the Renaissance, during which time faith in Christ crucified was held to be, in the language of 1 Corinthians 1, foolishness (Greek: *moria*), a form of spiritual madness. The sense of sanctified madness completely disappeared in the Classical age:

When Classical Christianity spoke of the madness of the Cross, it was to expose false reasoning and bring the eternal light of the truth out into the open: the madness of God-made man was wisdom that the men of this world failed to recognize in the unreason that ruled this world. . . . “Do not despair, if the cross which has brought the universe into submission to you is the madness and scandal of proud spirits.” (HM, 152)

Classical madness, by contrast, was purely and simply the negation and absence of reason. The mad were simply shorn of rationality—a capacity that in this period was considered the defining human characteristic—and were thus reduced to a state of animality: “The animal in man was no longer the indicator of a beyond, but had become in itself his madness, with no reference to anything other than itself, his madness in a natural state” (HM, 148). Whereas Renaissance society could identify with the mad as a particularly striking image of the fragility of its own reason, in the Classical age no affinity remained between the mad and the sane.

Whereas the Renaissance viewed madness as a transient stage through which one could pass, the Classical age considered it a one-way street: the mad could not be cured and were to be separated from the rest of the population, confined with other miscreants such as criminals, the licentious, and vagabonds. Furthermore, the mad were thought to be responsible for their condition and, correspondingly, madness was treated in

a way appropriate for those who had voluntarily given up their humanity and who, along with the other “unreasonable” groups, refused to work and contribute to the general prosperity and order of society: they were punished and made to perform forced labor. It follows that, when the mad were put on show before curious visitors, it was not merely as a form of entertainment, but as an object lesson in the consequences of choosing the path of unreason, much in the same way that today an ex-offender might address a high school class in order to warn the children of the dangers of choosing a life of crime. The catchall category of “unreason” may strike us today as bizarre, if not cruel—grouping together, as it does, the mad, criminals, and libertines—but this is an indication of just how much our own episteme differs from that of our seventeenth-century forebears.

Modern Madness: The Age of the Asylum

At the point of transition from the Classical to the modern age, we find the reforms of Philippe Pinel and his English Quaker counterpart, Samuel Tuke. Breaking the chains of the “great confinement,” Pinel and Tuke ushered in what Foucault calls “the age of the asylum,” when madness ceased to be a judicial category and became a medical concern. Whereas the Classical “hospital” was a place of confinement and punishment, the modern asylum is a place of treatment and cure; whereas the hospital housed the mad together with criminals, vagabonds, and libertines, the asylum separates them from these other groups.

What Foucault wants to question in his account of madness in the modern age is not the fact that Pinel and Tuke pioneered the liberation of the mad from their chains, but the meanings attached to such a liberation. Although “[Pinel’s] gesture was always seen as a ‘liberation’ of the mad,” Foucault suggests that “in fact it was something quite different” (*HM*, 481). Pinel and Tuke did not, Foucault argues, liberate the mad from the chains

in order that they might enjoy a state of freedom; they merely moved them from one condition of confinement to a new, more intrusive and more rigorous captivity. The new chains were not physical, but mental; they consisted in the process by which, in the asylum, the mad person was “forced to feel responsible for all within [his sickness] that could trouble morality and good society” (*HM*, 484), and to feel this way in the context of a regime which “substituted the stifling responsibility of anguish for the free terror of madness” (*HM*, 485). In other words, during the Classical age the restraint on the mad was exterior: shackles prevented them from circulating in society and from disturbing the other inhabitants of the hospitals. What the asylum now achieves, however, is an internalization of these controls and constraints: the mad are forced to experience their own condition as a form of mental illness, and they are made to police and control themselves in a much more invasive and intimate way than iron chains ever could. To borrow a term from Foucault’s later *Discipline and Punish*, the mad are taught to “normalize” themselves (to conform themselves to an idealized model of “normal” conduct, or else be punished). This new internal form of control is illustrated in the uncanny ritual of formal tea parties held at Samuel Tuke’s Retreat. The directors and the keepers at the Retreat would regularly invite some of the patients to tea parties:

All who attend, dress in their best clothes, and vie with each other in politeness and propriety. The best fare is provided, and the visitors are treated with all the attention of strangers. The evening generally passes in the greatest harmony and enjoyment. It rarely happens that any unpleasant circumstance occurs; the patients control, in a wonderful degree, their different propensities; and the scene is at once curious, and affectingly gratifying. (*HM*, 487)

Such normalization for Foucault is nothing less than the confinement of the mad within the walls—so to speak—of their own minds:

The madman was invited to turn himself into an object for the eyes of reasonable reason, as the perfect stranger, i.e., he whose foreignness is never perceptible. The city of reasonable men only welcomes him to the extent that he conforms to that anonymous type. (*HM*, 487)

As Foucault tellingly points out, this internal incarceration preceded physical liberation and acted as its condition; one recalcitrant patient who refused to normalize herself was “tied up in a straitjacket” and spoken to “in the strongest terms” until she broke down in “a torrent of tears, which she shed for nearly two hours” (*HM*, 502). Such were the limits of the new humanitarian approach.

In addition, unlike the wise fools of the Renaissance, the mad themselves have no voice in the age of the asylum, for the “language of psychiatry” is a “monologue of reason *about* madness” (*HM*, xxviii), and the mad are reduced to being the objects of the scientific expert’s ministrations. On into the twentieth century, Freudian psychoanalysis only further embeds this tendency: the mad are forced to understand their experience in terms of a preestablished psychoanalytic discourse that privileges certain causes and explanations at the same time as forbidding others, turning the voices of unreason into a symptom.

Critiques of Foucault’s History

Since the publication of *History of Madness* and Foucault’s other early works, a number of important critiques of his archaeological method have arisen. I can here only summarize the most

important objections and indicate how Foucault has been, or could be, defended.

The first attack on Foucault's archaeology is that he does not account for the transitions from one episteme to another. In line with Nietzsche's history of disjunctions and Bachelard's and Canguilhem's understanding of the history of science, Foucault insists that these transitions are not gradual and imperceptible metamorphoses, but "sudden take-offs" and "hastenings of evolution" (P/K, 112), and yet he offers no account of how such changes come about. One of the most famous and most cutting formulations of this critique is Sartre's jibe that Foucault's history "replaces cinema with a slide show, movement with a succession of immobile structures."¹³ In Foucault's defense, it could be argued that the whole point of his anti-Hegelian (and anti-Sartrean) approach is to disrupt the idea of a smooth, unbroken, and inevitable movement from one era to the next, and so to answer Sartre's critique on its own terms would undermine Foucault's own view of history. It should also be pointed out that Foucault did address this problem more (though not to everyone's satisfaction) in his later, genealogical work.

Second, Foucault's writing has been interrogated on empirical grounds. Critics have insisted that things simply did not happen as he claims. This position was powerfully and influentially argued by the American historian H. C. Erik Midelfort, commenting on the abridged translation of *Histoire de la folie à l'âge Classique*, published in 1964 as *Madness and Civilization*: "What we have discovered in looking at *Madness and Civilization* is that many of its arguments fly in the face of empirical evidence, and that many of its broadest generalizations are oversimplifications."¹⁴ The list of specific charges against Foucault is

13. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Jean-Paul Sartre répond," *L'arc* 30 (1966): 87. CW's translation.

14. Erik Midelfort, "Madness and Civilization in Early Modern Europe: A

large: Europe was in fact not crisscrossed by ships of fools, and Foucault's description of these ships as full of "the senseless in search of their reason" (*HM*, 10) is pure invention; the mad began to be confined well before the Classical age; the great confinement was about poverty, not madness; the mad were not confined during the Classical age; there was no new understanding of the relation between reason and madness at the end of the great confinement; Foucault's whole account is Franco-centric, etc.

How can Foucault respond to these empirical criticisms? Part of the answer is to remember what Foucauldian archaeology is doing, namely, mapping what was thinkable in a particular period. So although there may not have been ships of fools queuing up along the waterways of Europe, the image of the ship of fools was still prominent in Renaissance art and figured in the public imagination. More broadly, the empirical distinction between fact and fiction is not Foucault's primary concern:

I am well aware that I have never written anything but fictions. I do not mean to say, however, that truth is therefore absent. It seems to me that the possibility exists for fiction to function in truth, for a fictional discourse to induce effects of truth, and for bringing it about that a true discourse engenders or "manufactures" something that does not as yet exist, that is, "fictions" it.
(*P/K*, 193)

Foucault is not in the first instance asking, "What really happened?" but, "What accounts for the way in which people thought?" Also, epistemes can be formed just as much of images and fictions as they can of empirically verifiable facts.

Reappraisal of Michel Foucault," in *After the Reformation: Essays in Honour of J. H. Hexter*, ed. Barbara C. Malament (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), 259.

A third critique of Foucault as a historian is that the rejection of the idea of progress in his disjunctive account of history leaves him with a pessimistic and nihilistic view in which it becomes impossible to say that one episteme is “better” than another, evacuating any possibility of Foucault’s thought being pressed into the service of political emancipation or resistance. Foucault’s response to this accusation, recorded in a visit to Berkeley in the year before he died, is instructive and worth quoting at length:

I don’t think that to be suspicious means that you don’t have any hope. Despair and hopelessness are one thing; suspicion is another. And if you are suspicious, it is because, of course, you have a certain hope. The problem is to know which kind of hope you have and which kind of hope it is reasonable to have in order to avoid what I would call not the “pessimistic circle” you speak of but the political circle which introduces in your hopes, and through your hopes, the things you want to avoid by these hopes.¹⁵

Foucault insists that his understanding of history does not issue in pessimism; rather, it makes it clear that things could be otherwise, that the present is contingent, and that no order or way of thinking is necessary, least of all our current one. Far from putting a dampener on the possibility of political activism and social transformation, archaeology provides a context in which such changes can and do take place. Just what form such a transformation might take we will explore more fully in chapter 3.

Fourth, there is what we might call the *tu quoque* (Latin: “you also”) critique. If Foucault is correct, then he is just as bound by his own episteme as anyone else, which undermines any claim

15. Jeremy Carrette quotes this passage in the foreword to *Religion and Culture: Michel Foucault* (London: Routledge, 2013), xiv, where he refers to it as “an unpublished part of a discussion with several Americans at Berkeley.”

on his part to give an impartial account of different epistemic epochs. Foucault readily admits that his own writing depends on “conditions and rules of which [he was] very largely unaware” (*OT*, xv), and he affirms that we cannot adequately describe our own archive (i.e., our own historical moment) because we are part of it (*AK*, 130). When this critique is used as a way to probe Foucault’s analyses, it certainly has merit; when it is used as an excuse not to think seriously at all about what he is saying, it is an intellectual cop-out.

This brief survey of critiques of Foucault’s historical method brings us to the end of our journey through his archaeological period. We turn now to his writing during the 1970s, commonly designated “genealogical.” It is both a continuation and a revision of his archaeological approach, and it is the period when we see the theme of power relations take center stage.