

Foucault's Kantian Critique: Philosophy and the Present

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Abstract

In the early 1980s, Michel Foucault startlingly argues that his intellectual lineage can be traced back to Immanuel Kant. Given Foucault's criticisms of Kantian and Enlightenment emphases on universal truths and values, his declaration that his work is Kantian seems paradoxical. I argue that this declaration is a way for Foucault to publicly acknowledge to his critics that he is not, as some of them charge, attempting a total critique of Enlightenment beliefs and values. He is instead attempting to question and transform them from within, through a discourse that is meant as a form of practice, as a catalyst for change in the ways we think and act today. I conclude with the suggestion that in so doing, Foucault encourages his intellectual audience to rethink the ways in which their own philosophical work helps or hinders efforts to promote the Enlightenment ideal of freedom in their current social contexts.

According to James Schmidt and Thomas E. Wartenberg, in a 1983 lecture Michel Foucault provides an “uncharacteristically straightforward declaration of his own allegiances,” made more striking because he traces his intellectual lineage back to Kant (Schmidt and Wartenberg 1994, 284). Since Foucault spent so much of his career “showing that every alleged victory of enlightenment marked the triumph of a new and insidious form of domination” many will likely wonder: “Foucault . . . a Kantian? . . . Who, one might reasonably ask, is kidding whom?” (284).¹

Daniel Touey suggests that in claiming Kant as his intellectual forefather, Foucault presented to his scholarly critics “an apology in the best Socratic sense: an argument . . . that his life’s work was not meant to destroy the critical tradition handed down by the Enlightenment but to reinterpret it in contemporary terms,” just as Socrates argued that rather than being “impious or traitorous” to Athenian values, he was trying to find “a more rational understanding” of them (Touey 1998, 88). Foucault was, in a sense, on trial, charged by his critics with what Foucault calls “Enlightenment blackmail” : “you either accept the Enlightenment and remain within the tradition of its rationalism . . . ; or you criticize the Enlightenment and then try to escape from its principles of rationality” (Foucault 1997b, 120). If Touey is right to say that Foucault’s return to Kant constitutes a kind of “apology,” then we can interpret Foucault as implying thereby that he is not attempting to escape from Enlightenment thought entirely, is not being “impious” in regard to its values (which are still prominent today). Instead, he attempts to change Enlightenment thought from within, by encouraging its adherents to question and consider whether their own views and actions really live up to Enlightenment ideals.

I argue that the interpretation of Foucault’s return to Kant as a kind of “apology” is a productive one, as it allows us to bring to the fore the possibility (not discussed by Touey) that Foucault was trying to encourage his peers to think differently about their own intellectual, philosophical and critical work. Whether or not he succeeded, whether or not we agree with or know much about Foucault’s work, we can still find something valuable, I think, in considering his “apology”: it can bring us, if we as thinkers are heirs to the Enlightenment, to question and take seriously the relationship of our own philosophical work to the promotion of Enlightenment ideals in the present, such as individual and social/political freedom.

Two Kinds of Kantian Critique

In a text first published in 1984, Foucault distinguishes between two kinds of critique in Kant's writings, only one of which he explicitly claims as linked to his own. The first Foucault labels an "analytic of truth," and he connects it to Kant's three *Critiques*.² The "analytic of truth" is transcendental in that it "seek[s] to identify the universal structures of all knowledge or of all possible moral action," and it is aimed at "knowing what limits knowledge has to renounce transgressing" (Foucault 1997b, 125, 124). The second kind of Kantian critique Foucault calls an "ontology of ourselves," or an "ontology of the present" (Foucault 1997c, 100). It focuses on the possibility of transgressing limits rather than attempting to establish them, by asking: "in what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints?" (Foucault 1997b, 124). The "ontology of the present" asks about possible transformations within the present, by "separat[ing] out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think" (125). To anyone familiar with the corpus of Foucault's work, it will come as no surprise that it is the second form of critique from which he claims his own philosophical lineage, while criticizing the first.

Critique as "analytic of truth," locating universal structures and limits, is easy to recognize in Kant's work. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, for example, Kant puts reason to the task of discovering its own nature and limits, and argues that "nature" has placed "unalterable limits" on what it is possible for human reason to know (Kant 1965, B295).³ The second kind of critique, the "ontology of ourselves" that works to transgress limits, is more difficult to find in Kant. According to Foucault, it is most clearly shown in Kant's essay entitled "What is Enlightenment?" This text began a new trend in modern philosophy, Foucault argues, that of

addressing the present “as a philosophical event to which the philosopher who speaks about it belongs” (Foucault 1997c, 85). “For the first time,” according to Foucault, one finds a philosopher considering, as a philosophical problem, the present and his/her own role as a philosopher therein: “What is my actuality? What is the meaning of this actuality? And what am I doing when I speak about this actuality?” (86, 87).⁴ The philosopher here considers a current concern on which philosophical thought could have an impact, and focuses on what such thought can *do* in the present, what “mode of action ... it is capable of exerting” (Foucault 1997c, 87). Philosophical critique of this form is concerned with its own potentiality as practice, with its efficacy in promoting transgression of limits that only appear to be necessary.

According to Foucault, Kant’s essay on enlightenment engages in liberatory and transformative practice in that it operates as “an act of defiance, as a challenge” to the ways people are being governed at the present time (Foucault 1997a, 28): it offers an “exit” or a “way out,” an “emergence” from the “immaturity” of being unable to “use one’s understanding without guidance from another” ((Foucault 1997b, 104; Kant 1983a, 41). He notes that Kant provides a kind of command to his audience to muster the courage to transform the present by pulling themselves out of their “self-imposed” immaturity: “‘Have courage to use your own understanding!’” (Kant 1983a, 41).⁵ Kant also suggests political reform in this essay, calling on leaders of states to facilitate the public’s emergence from their immaturity by opening up the public sphere as a place where people can freely use their own reason to discuss and debate in public forums (Kant 1983a, 44-46).⁶ As Foucault interprets it, then, in this essay Kant uses his role as a philosopher in the present to issue a challenge to others, to encourage transgression of limits in terms of how individuals are currently governed, both by themselves and by their political leaders.

Foucault argues that this kind of critique is driven by a particular “attitude” towards the present that he claims characterizes modernity (Foucault 1997b, 113). The “attitude of modernity” values the present, but also has “a desperate eagerness to imagine it, to imagine it otherwise than it is, and to transform it not by destroying it but by grasping it in what it is” (117). The critic with this kind of ethos finds something in the present to which s/he appeals in a way that encourages change in the present, not by negating the present, trying to stand outside of it entirely, but by both “grasping it in what it is” and altering it at the same time. Such a critic engages in “the practice of a liberty that simultaneously respects [the present] and violates it,” through a “historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them” (117, 132).

According to Foucault, Kant expresses a “modern attitude” by analyzing the sources of the immaturity he bemoans in his present and arguing that they are contingent and subject to change.⁷ The public is largely immature because of individual attitudes and social/political practices that are by no means necessary and inevitable. In this text Kant finds a current concern that calls for philosophical thought and argument, and encourages change by revealing some limits as contingent and in need of transformation. According to Foucault, Kant also finds something in the present that can be used to transform it: he locates in his present an enthusiasm for individual freedom, autonomy, and political revolution, and he appeals to this to encourage enlightenment as a release from immaturity.⁸

Foucault argues that he is engaged in the second kind of Kantian critique in his genealogies of current social practices and institutions, revealing the relations of truth and power therein. He claims that in these critiques he attempts to find something within the present on which to focus, in order to initiate change in the present: he tries to “choose a field containing a

number of points that are particularly fragile or sensitive at the present time,” and then uses a historical analysis to show “both why and how things were able to establish themselves as such,” and that therefore “what appears obvious to us is not at all so obvious” (Foucault, 158, 161).⁹ In so doing, he appeals to a kind of desire for freedom that exists in the present, in order to encourage others to take up the possibilities for change he thus reveals: the issues he discusses are sites of struggles already taking place against particular practices of power by those who are working for greater freedom. Foucault then “locates and marks the weak points, the openings, the lines of power” in order that this information “might be used for a possible battle, to be waged by those who wish to wage it, in forms yet to be found” (Foucault 1996c, 225; 1996a, 262).¹⁰ Foucault thus claims to analyze the present in order to transform it “by grasping it in what it is” – he reveals the fragility of present beliefs and practices, and uses a desire for freedom to encourage their transformation.

It is thus possible to recognize how Foucault is connecting his own work to something he calls an “ontology of the present” in Kant’s essay on enlightenment. We are now in a better position to understand why he would go through the difficulty of finding a way to interpret some of Kant’s writings such that it makes sense to trace his own philosophical lineage to them.¹¹

Critique as Practice

If Foucault is attempting a critique what is happening “here and now” as someone who belongs to this present and yet is able to “violate” it, it makes sense for him to acknowledge both how his own thought is rooted in the present, and how it is still possible for him to encourage change from a position within it.¹² Stating his own connection to Kant, then, could be a way for Foucault to consciously and publicly acknowledge that he is not trying to think from a

historically detached position, but rather from a position within his own present as it is tied to its history in the Enlightenment.¹³ At the same time, Foucault also wants to argue that even if our thought is determined “to a certain extent” by the Enlightenment, we are not entirely “trapped” by this history: “there are always possibilities of changing the situation. We cannot jump *outside* the situation But you can always change it” (Foucault 1996f, 386). For Foucault, we can always find possibilities for resistance to many of the limits to thought and action under which we find ourselves, even from the same sources and within the same discourses, institutions and practices as are responsible for the imposition of these limits themselves.¹⁴

Accordingly, if Kantian critique as an “analytic of truth” sets limits that have led to problematic practices of power, as Foucault argues, we can go back to the source and find also a means of resistance in Kant’s work – the notion of the second kind of critique, the “ontology of the present” that emphasizes the practice of freedom through transgression of limits.¹⁵ This view of freedom harkens back not only to the Kant of “What is Enlightenment?” (who encourages others to alter their self-imposed limits of “immaturity”), but also to the Kant of the *Critique of Pure Reason* who emphasizes that though there are absolute limits to human reason’s realm of knowledge, it also has a “natural tendency to transgress these limits” (Kant 1965, B670).¹⁶ Kant explicitly links the concept of freedom to the action of transgressing limits: “it is in the power of freedom to pass beyond any and every specified limit” (B374).¹⁷ Thus, to the limits Kantian, Enlightenment thought proposes through the “analytic of truth,” it also provides a means and impetus for change through a focus on freedom as transgression of limits.¹⁸

It is at this point that Foucault’s critics would ask: On what basis is he evaluating some practices of power as “problematic” and in need of resistance? What is “the ethical-political perspective that informs his critique” (Bernstein 1994, 234)? Some argue that Foucault’s work is

contradictory, because he both attempts a kind of total critique of Enlightenment beliefs, norms and values, while seeming to appeal to these to justify his evaluative claims. According to Jürgen Habermas, while Foucault's genealogical critiques claim to show the pervasive effects of power in modern intellectual and social practices, to the question of "why should we muster any resistance at all against this all-pervasive power," Foucault either remains silent or seems to appeal to "familiar determinations from the normativistic language games that he has explicitly rejected" (Habermas 1987, 284).¹⁹ Nancy Fraser makes a similar point when she argues that in the absence of any alternative normative framework, according to Fraser, Foucault appears to be "presupposing the very liberal norms he criticizes," and if this is the case he is "caught in an outright contradiction" (Fraser 1989, 30).²⁰

I agree rather with Schmidt and Wartenberg, who argue that Foucault never tried to nor wanted to break entirely from Kantian thought, that Foucault's "stance toward the enlightenment remained a good deal more nuanced and complex than his critics would lead us to believe" (Schmidt and Wartenberg 1994, 303).²¹ He does not attempt to stand entirely outside the Enlightenment tradition in order to criticize it, as if he were speaking from a historically neutral realm of universal truths that could be used to develop a basis for his critique.²² He instead criticizes Enlightenment thought from a distanced position within it, as someone whose work is itself shaped by its historical background in the Enlightenment, yet who is also distancing himself from it enough to subject it to question. Foucault's return to Kant can be read as a public acknowledgement of his debt to the Enlightenment, showing that he knowingly appeals to Enlightenment values in his critical work.

To those critics who inquire about the basis for his evaluative claims, Foucault answers, by returning to Kant, that he is relying on Enlightenment values that already make sense to those

whose present is shaped by the Enlightenment, i.e., that are already meaningful in the present, for himself and for his audience.²³ This is in part because he does not believe it is possible for him to think entirely neutrally, as if from outside the history that has shaped modern, Western, philosophical thought.²⁴ It is also because he attempts to use his genealogical critiques to *do* something, to act for change. In order to do so effectively, his critique must make sense and operate as a catalyst for transformative efforts by those who are already enmeshed to some degree in current discourses, adhering to at least some of their attendant beliefs and values. Unless major transformation has already taken place, in order to question and resist and move beyond the constraints of the present, we often have little choice but to appeal to beliefs, values and practices that are currently meaningful at the present time.²⁵ Otherwise, it is quite possible that one's audience will either not understand one's critique, or find themselves lacking the conceptual tools with which to do anything about it even if they do.

The "Why" of Philosophy today

I conclude with a sketch of an argument that begins by asking: What might Foucault have been attempting to *do* by taking such pains to explain how he is still operating within the historical context shaped in part by the Enlightenment? It is significant to note that in the texts, lectures and interviews where he traces his work to Kant, Foucault is explaining and justifying his intellectual projects to an audience consisting of other scholars and intellectuals familiar with his work. It is possible he was trying to encourage change, transgression of limits in *this* audience. In returning to Kant, Foucault implies that he belongs, adheres to some extent to the norms and practices of the philosophical tradition descended from the Enlightenment; yet his

discussion of Kant also provides a kind of exhortation to his intellectual peers to transgress the limits of how philosophical thought conceives of itself and operates today.

Specifically, by referring to how Kant at times used philosophical thinking to transform the present from within the present, Foucault suggests that that mode of philosophy may be as much a part of the Enlightenment tradition as the more familiar mode derived in part from Kant: where the philosopher attempts to think in the realm of universal, *a priori* truths only.²⁶ By tracing his own immanent critique of the present back to Kant, he attaches to it a philosophical pedigree that could indicate to those who consider themselves heirs to the Enlightenment that they should pay attention to, and possibly reconsider, their own relationship as philosophers to their present.²⁷

Thus Foucault's return to Kant, if thought through, can inspire philosophers in the Enlightenment tradition to consider more seriously the "why" of philosophy: Why is my philosophical thought important in the present in which I am engaged? What does/can/should it *do* therein? Foucault suggests, through his interpretation of Kant, that these are important questions to ask, because "[o]ur liberty is at stake" (Foucault 1997a, 35).

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Notes

¹ Foucault focused his criticism on certain Enlightenment beliefs: e.g., that power could be resisted, opposed, and overcome by appeals to universal truth, that we could become free by governing ourselves according to reason's universal and absolute laws, eliminating the need for oppressive coercion. In his genealogical studies of the history of institutions and practices related to madness, medicine, punishment and sexuality, Foucault endeavored for many years to argue that where we appear to be more "free" (e.g., less repressed sexually, able to speak and act much more freely than in the past) and less subject to force in governing and punishment, this is only because we have been subject to power in more insidious ways: we have developed forms of power that "discipline" and "normalize" individuals such that instead of requiring governance from the outside, they can govern themselves. This means they can be allowed more freedom of action, because they will discipline themselves to only act in certain ways to begin with. Such analyses and criticisms of the ways in which individuals have been "disciplined" and "normalized" can be found in numerous works spanning Foucault's career. A concise discussion of some of these can be found in Foucault (1980b), as well as the other essays and interviews in that collection (*Power/Knowledge*). For longer studies, see, e.g., Foucault (1990) and (1995).

There have been numerous articles published in the last two decades, expressing how strange it is that Foucault should publicly claim himself a Kantian, and attempting to determine why he might have done so. See, e.g., Bernstein (1994), Gordon (1986), (1989), Harpham (1994), Hiley (1985), McCarthy (1990), Pryor (1998), Touey (1998), Schmidt and Wartenberg (1994). Schmidt and Wartenberg argue that there are several ways in which Foucault had been concerned with Kant throughout his career, and that his turn towards Kant near the end of his life is not such a clean break as it may seem (Schmidt and Wartenberg 1994, 303-307). Though in his early writings Foucault focused on the oppressive potentialities of the universal limits on reason and concepts of the self set by Enlightenment thought, in his later work, according to Schmidt and Wartenberg, Foucault began to focus on the enabling power of such limits. "Power always appears in two guises: it dominates, but it also enables" (305); and in his return to Kant later in life Foucault began to focus on the growth of capacities (such as the ability to create the self aesthetically) that the Enlightenment made possible.

² "[I]n his great critical work," according to Foucault, "Kant posited and founded this tradition of philosophy that asks the question of the conditions under which true knowledge is possible" (Foucault 1997c, 99).

³ "All our knowledge falls within the bounds of possible experience," Kant argues, and because reason also has "a natural tendency to transgress these limits," it stands "in need of a discipline, to restrain its tendency towards extension beyond the narrow limits of possible experience and to guard it against extravagance and error" (Kant 1965, B185, B670, B739). The first *Critique* itself serves to discipline reason by encouraging it to stay within the legitimate limits of its knowledge.

Reference to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* give the pagination numbers for the second edition (1787), listed as the "B" edition as opposed to the "A," except where the text is included in only the first edition (1781), the "A" edition. The translation used is that by Normal Kemp Smith (Kant 1965), but I have not used the page numbers for that particular edition, in order that references may still be found in other translations and editions that list the "B" pagination.

⁴ According to Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, Foucault sees in this essay by Kant "a philosopher qua philosopher realizing for the first time that his thinking arises out of and is an attempt to respond to his historical situation" (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1986, 111). It may seem strange to claim that Kant viewed his own philosophical thought as arising out of his own place in history, given Kant's emphasis on *a priori*, universal and necessary truth in his critical work. It is possible, however, to argue that Kant's critical work was largely motivated by concerns specific to his historical situation, and that he himself recognized this to a certain degree – not only in "What is Enlightenment?," but in the first *Critique* as well. In both of his prefaces to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant motivates his project by reference to what is happening in the present field of metaphysics: unlike logic, mathematics and physics, metaphysics has not yet found itself on "the sure road to science" (Kant 1965, Bxv); rather, it finds itself to be a "battle-field of . . . endless controversies" (Aviii). It is the purpose of the *Critique of Pure Reason* to find a way to quiet these disputes (if only by showing that they cannot ever be settled, and must be given up) and to show how metaphysics as a science is possible (Axii; Bxxii). From such statements by Kant of

what is driving the first *Critique*, and from what Foucault highlights in “What is Enlightenment?” (discussed further below), we can see how it is possible to argue that Kant at times recognizes how his thinking is at least motivated by what is happening in his own actuality, how he is responding to what seems at the moment to call for philosophical thought (even if, of course, the content and results of what he thinks and theorizes in response is not argued, by Kant, to be a mere product of his own historical situation).

⁵ Focusing on the “call to courage” Kant gives to his audience, a kind of call to action, Foucault points out that “[o]ne should not forget that [this text] was a newspaper article. . . . It is very interesting to see from what point on philosophers intervene in newspapers in order to say something that is for them philosophically interesting and which, nevertheless, is inscribed in a certain relationship to the public which they intend to mobilize” (Foucault 1997a, 33-34). Foucault is here emphasizing that in this text Kant is not simply explaining a philosophical point to other philosophers, or disseminating truth for the sake of knowledge alone, but is putting himself in a position to try to “mobilize” others to action. While he was certainly interested in philosophical understanding for its own sake, Kant was also undeniably concerned with the Enlightenment project of promoting social and political freedom, as well as peace (see, e.g., the various texts by Kant collected in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays on Politics, History and Morals*, trans. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983).

⁶ Of course, Kant famously insists that individuals must be allowed to use their own reason *only* in a public sense, when they are speaking or writing “before the entire literate world” (Kant 1983a, 42). When one is operating within one’s particular social role, fulfilling the duties of “a civic post or office that has been entrusted to him,” one must still follow the rules attached to the post and the guidance of authorities (42). In one’s role as a citizen speaking to other citizens, however, outside of one’s official duties, one must be left free to express his/her views. Kant valued freedom of reason in the sense of “freedom of the pen,” which he thought should be as wide as possible, including criticisms of the government: “regarding whatever in the ruler’s decrees seem to wrong the commonwealth, the citizen must retain the authority to make his opinions publicly known, and this authority must receive the ruler’s approval” (Kant 1983c, 82).

⁷ For Kant, that people do not think for themselves is not due to their inability to do so, but to “laziness and cowardice,” “lack of resolve and courage,” which are exacerbated by the fact that the “guardians who have so benevolently taken over the supervision of men” have been sure to “show them the danger that threatens them, should they attempt to walk alone” – a danger that is “not actually so great” as it is made out to appear (Kant 1983a, 41).

⁸ Kant analyzes the present as part of teleological process in which humankind moves towards establishing “a universal civil society administered in accord with the right,” that allows for the greatest freedom of each member possible within the context of equal freedom for all (Kant 1983b, 33). For Kant we are driven towards this goal, Foucault argues, by a desire and enthusiasm for individual autonomy, freedom and political revolution. Foucault points to the second essay of Kant’s *Conflict of the Faculties*, wherein Kant argues that we can locate a sign within empirical history to show that humanity is morally progressing. He finds such a sign in the enthusiasm for revolution that is shown by spectators of revolutions throughout history (Kant 1979, 151-157). This enthusiasm among spectators, those who are not themselves participants in revolutions, is universal throughout history, according to Kant, and it reveals that humanity is driven to progress towards the goal of a republican state (153). Foucault argues accordingly that Kant “heroizes” the “enthusiasm for the Revolution” in France during his own present time, using that as a means to push for change in the present (Foucault 1997c, 94). Such enthusiasm as a desire for freedom and autonomy, Foucault says, “continues the process of the *Aufklärung*” for Kant (95). Kant appealed to this desire for freedom in his exhortation to the public to free themselves from their own immaturity, to use their own reason autonomously rather than being directed how to think and act from an outside source.

Still, though Kant found something in the desire for revolution that revealed a process of enlightenment, he refused to allow for actual rebellion and revolution of the people against their ruling authorities, even if they are being governed unjustly. The people never have “coercive rights” against their rulers that would allow for a justified rebellion (Kant 1983c, 82). Kant’s reasoning for this injunction is in part that it would not be possible to turn the right of rebellion into a universal law, since to do so would be to “introduce a state of complete lawlessness, where at the least all right would lose its sanction,” and to “destroy all civil constitutions, thus annihilating the only

state in which men can possess rights” (81, 79). Possession of rights and freedoms requires a state of coercive power to preserve them from encroachment; and a maxim that allowed the people the right to rebel against the governmental leaders would undermine the very authority that allows for the existence of rights within the commonwealth in the first place. Kant also justifies his prohibition against rebellion by the requirement of publicity in one’s maxims. He calls the following “the *transcendental formula* of public right”: “All actions that affect the rights of other men are wrong if their maxim is not consistent with publicity” (Kant 1983d, 135). In other words, “if my maxim cannot be *openly divulged* without at the same time defeating my own intention, i.e., must be kept *secret* for it to succeed, or if I cannot *publicly acknowledge* it without thereby inevitably arousing everyone’s opposition to my plan,” then my maxim goes against the right, i.e., is unjust (135). Since rebellion against a state leader would have to be kept secret in order to succeed, it does not fulfill the requirement of possible publicity and is therefore unjust.

⁹ For example, Foucault claims that *Madness and Civilization* shows that “[o]ur relationship to madness is an historically established relationship, and from the second that it is historically constituted, it can be politically destroyed” (Foucault 1997d, 162-163); “at the conclusion of the book we can establish new relationships with what was at issue; for instance, madness, its constitution, its history in the modern world” (Foucault 1991, 34).

¹⁰ Instead of setting boundaries to who we are, the “ontology of ourselves” Foucault indicates he performs seeks “to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom,” and is thus “a patient labor giving form to our impatience for liberty (Foucault 1997b, 126, 133). But the Foucauldian genealogist lets others take the lead in deciding if their “impatience for liberty” is enough for them to take on the task of changing the present, and if so, when and how. Foucault insists that his role as an intellectual is not “to tell others what they must do” (Foucault 1996b, 462). He claims to describe things “in such a way that the possible paths of attack are delineated,” but that he does not thereby “force or compel anyone to attack,” leaving rather a “freedom . . . at the end of [his] discussion for anyone who wants or does not want to get something done” (Foucault 1996a, 262). Foucault claims to start from struggles that are already going on in the present, oppositions to power that are already taking place, where individuals are working towards greater freedom against limits experienced as oppressive (Foucault 1983, 211-212). He then appeals to the desire for freedom underlying such struggles (without saying so directly) in order to encourage others to take up his genealogical analyses as tools in their oppositions, and to encourage those who are not yet struggling to understand why and how it might be desirable to try to work towards more freedom. Foucault argues that critique as an “ontology of ourselves” must “put itself to the test of reality, of contemporary reality, both to grasp the points where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take” (Foucault 1997b, 126). Critique can show that some things may be subject to transformation, but it must be “put to the test of reality” in order to determine if such change is “desirable” according to those who would undertake it, and what form it should take. Situating itself in the present, such a critique appeals to people in the present to use their current values and beliefs to decide what, if anything, must be done.

¹¹ It seems like Foucault has to go through some difficult interpretation, and perhaps even to some extent twisting of Kant’s words and purposes, to come up with a way to link his own work to that of Kant. It seems especially troubling to try to say, as Foucault does, that in some of his works Kant attempted to criticize his present through thought that is firmly rooted in that present, simultaneously belonging to it and violating it, given that Kant was quite clear in his *Critiques* that he was seeking to determine the universal and absolute nature and limits of our reason to determine its legitimate use in gaining knowledge and guiding action. In so doing, he consciously attempted to operate on a purely *a priori* level, leaving out anything that would derive from contingent, historical, empirical sources. See, e.g., the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant 1965, B28-B29); *Critique of Practical Reason* Part I, Book I, Chapter I, Theorems I-IV (Kant 1993, 17-43). It may be possible, as Foucault tries to do, to conjure an interpretation of Kant’s work in “What is Enlightenment?” and elsewhere that shows him to address the present without escaping from it into a “pure form” of universal, *a priori* thought, but it is undeniable that a large portion of his work is rooted in claims whose truth is not meant to be relative to his own historical situation.

¹² Foucault argues that while his genealogical studies always start with and refer to present problems in the ways they are presently formulated and understood, the point is not simply “to follow what is happening,” to report what is going on as if it were the case that “we are imprisoned in our own system” (Foucault 1997d, 158, 160). The point

is to try to provide, for himself and his audience, “an experience of our modernity that might permit us to emerge from it transformed” (Foucault 1991, 33). He is trying to engage in a critique that is both descriptive and transformative, as someone who is shaped by the present as shares its concerns, yet who is distanced enough from it to show how it might be changed. He claims to undertake a “diagnosis of today” that “does not consist only of a description of who we are, [but] rather a line of fragility of today to follow and understand, if and how what is, can no longer be what it is. . . . [T]he description must be formulated in a kind of virtual break, which opens . . . a room of concrete freedom, that is possible transformation” (Foucault 1996e, 359). Foucauldian genealogical critique both describes what is happening here and now, and attempts to do so in such a way as to open up a break that allows for change.

¹³ Foucault insists that “[w]e must try to proceed with the analysis of ourselves as beings who are historically determined, to a certain extent, by the Enlightenment” – himself included (Foucault 1997b, 120).

¹⁴ This is related to Foucault’s analysis of the exercise of power as “a mode of action upon the actions of others,” which presupposes that “the one over whom power is exercised” is someone who is “capable of action” and who is thereby “free” in the sense of being “faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments may be realized” (Foucault 1983, 220, 221). For Foucault, “as soon as there is a power relation, there is the possibility of resistance” in that all relations of power require that a number of different ways of re-acting are possible, some of which are capable of resisting and modifying the relation (Foucault 1996c, 224). Further, according to Foucault, this possibility is formed “right at the point where relations of power are exercised” (Foucault 1980a, 142).

¹⁵ Foucault explicitly argues that the critique of the present in which he is engaged (and which he claims to get from Kant) is a means of practicing freedom by engaging in and encouraging transgression of limits: such a critique is a “historico-practical test of the limits that we may go beyond, and thus as work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings” (Foucault 1997c, 127). The freedom to which Foucault refers is something that is “practiced,” something that one *does*: “Liberty is a practice. . . . ‘liberty’ is what must be exercised” (Foucault 1996h, 339). For Foucault, practicing freedom has to do with taking stock of limits and working to transgress or transform them. In an interview, Foucault clearly links the notion of liberty as a practice to that of transforming limits: “the important question . . . is not whether a culture without restraints is possible or even desirable but whether the system of constraints in which a society functions leaves individuals the liberty to transform the system. . . . [A] system of constraint becomes truly intolerable when the individuals who are affected by it don’t have the means of modifying it” (Foucault 1996g, 327). Similarly, Foucault argues that “practices of freedom do not exist . . . or are extremely constrained and limited” under a “state of domination,” where “an individual or social group succeeds in blocking a field of power relations, immobilizing them and preventing any reversibility of movement by economic, political or military means” (Foucault 1996d, 434).

John Rajchman argues that for Foucault, “our real freedom does not consist either in telling our true stories and finding our place within some tradition or ethical code, in completely determining our actions in accordance with universal principles We are, on the contrary, ‘really’ free because we can identify and change those procedures or forms through which our stories become true, because we can question and modify those systems which make (only) particular kinds of action possible, and because there is no ‘authentic’ self-relation we must conform to” (Rajchman 1985, 122). For Rajchman, Foucauldian freedom consists in “noncompliance in concrete situations of power” (93).

¹⁶ Reason’s tendency to transgress these limits can result, if claims to knowledge are made therefrom, in a “natural and inevitable illusion” that continually entraps reason “into momentary aberrations ever and again calling for correction” (Kant 1965, B354). Yet this transgression is also the source of reason’s transcendental “ideas” for which there are other important purposes, beyond the acquisition of knowledge that is impossible through their use. See, e.g., Kant (1965, B 671-B732).

¹⁷ Kant makes this statement in regard to the question of how far humanity might be able to progress towards certain ideals of perfection, such as the development of a civil society such that each member is both subject and sovereign, and each has as much freedom as is compatible with an equal freedom of the others. Kant states that we ought not

to specify exactly how close we can get to perfection in ideals such as this, since “the issue depends on freedom;” and whenever we specify limits, our freedom allows us to go beyond these – further than we might have guessed when stating the limits to have far we can get towards our ideals (Kant 1965, B 371-374).

¹⁸ Thus, when Foucault criticizes certain practices of power deriving from Enlightenment thought as “disciplinary” and “normalizing,” he does so on the basis of their failing to promote this kind of freedom. Foucault implies with his return to Kant that this freedom is a fundamental value, that in a significant sense it drives Kant’s critical work: reason must remain within certain limits, for Kant, in order that freedom and autonomy can be assured. Foucault indicates that Kant’s *Critiques*, though concerned with placing limits on knowledge and action, did so for the sake of promoting freedom and autonomy. It is when we understand the limits of reason in its pursuit of knowledge and its guidance of (moral) action that we are able to govern ourselves instead of being subject to the governance of others (Foucault 1997a 35; Foucault 1997b, 111).

I think a good case could be made that Kant saw his philosophical work as contributing to humanity’s progress towards Enlightenment, especially in the form of the creation of “a universal civil society administered in accord with the right,” obligating “every legislator to formulate his laws in such a way that they *could* have sprung from the unified will of the entire people” (Kant 1983b, 33; 1983c, 77). The first two *Critiques*, at least, could be read as springing from this project – showing what reason is capable of knowing in an absolute sense (so that those who are autonomously thinking for themselves do not thereby end up in illusion), and how we ought to conduct ourselves so that freedom and autonomy in action is possible (through adhering to universal moral laws). Foucault does not make this case carefully, and I do not have the space to do so here. However, he does imply that freedom and autonomy are more fundamental for Kant than the emphasis on universal truths and universal moral laws, that the latter are developed in order to promote the former. If so, Foucault seems to be suggesting, then if the latter does not help promote the former, the latter needs to be rethought. Foucault’s genealogical work, in showing the oppressive results of certain modes of Enlightenment thought, expresses that we are still on the long path to Enlightenment: “Many things in our experience convince us that the historical event of the Enlightenment did not make us mature adults, and we have not reached that stage yet” (Foucault 1997b, 132).

¹⁹ According to Habermas, in his later writings on Kant Foucault simply brings out into the open contradictions that had permeated his work as a whole (Habermas 1989, 178-179). Habermas argues that in his discussion of the two forms of critique as “analytic of truth” and “ontology of ourselves,” Foucault “opposes his critique of power . . . to the analytic of the true in such a way that the former is deprived of the normative standards it would have to derive from the latter” (Habermas 1989, 178-179). Foucault’s attempt to situate himself as “a thinker in the tradition of the Enlightenment,” according to Habermas, cannot be reconciled with his own “unyielding critique of modernity” (176). Similarly, Thomas McCarthy argues that in his later work Foucault undergoes a radical shift to the opposite extreme of the views exhibited in his earlier work: from an early emphasis on the ubiquity of power and its subjection of individuals as “subjects” to a late emphasis on an Enlightenment view of individuals as free, creative and autonomous in their resistance to power (McCarthy 1990, 463). The latter cannot be reconciled with the former, McCarthy implies.

In a somewhat different, but related vein, Karl-Otto Apel argues that Foucault is one of a group of postmodern thinkers who attempt a “total critique of reason” through the use of reason itself, thereby involving themselves in a “performative self-contradiction” (Apel 2001, 166, 164). More specifically, his argument is that “argumentation includes universal validity claims,” that in its very performance, argumentation implies claims to universal validity (166). When one questions these claims through the *content* of arguments, one performs that which one questions/rejects/criticizes, thereby contradicting oneself.

²⁰ According to Fraser, in criticizing the “dangers” of “disciplinary” practices of power, Foucault often seems to appeal, overtly or otherwise, to values that sound very much like the freedom and autonomy championed by Enlightenment thinkers: “if one considers the disciplinary, or carceral, society described in *Discipline and Punish*,” and asks “what exactly is wrong with that society, Kantian notions leap immediately to mind” (Fraser 1989, 30).

In an article entitled “Foucault: Critique as a Philosophical Ethos,” Richard J. Bernstein tries to determine whether Foucault’s critics are making this problem out to be more than it need be, whether they are, indeed, “blackmailing” Foucault into either accepting or rejecting the Enlightenment. He concludes that this problem and its variants “do not arise from imposing an alien grid or set of demands upon Foucault. On the contrary, they arise

from his *own* practice of critique” (Bernstein 1994, 234). Consequently, according to Bernstein, Foucault leaves us with a body of work that “forces us to raise questions and at the same time appears to deny us any means for effectively dealing with these questions” (Bernstein 1994, 234).

As I argue below, it seems clear that Foucault was trying to find a way to manage to ground the process of questioning and evaluating without appealing to the kind of ground that Bernstein and other critics are requiring – one that requires that we escape from the present into a realm of universal truth from which we can justify our claims in an absolute sense. Whether or not this is possible is another question; but I don’t think that Foucault “fail[ed] to see that what gets pushed out the front door is smuggled in through the back door,” as Bernstein argues (Bernstein 1994, 228). Rather, he seemed quite clear that the “dangers” and “problems” he raises are such from a perspective in the here and now.

²¹ Ian Hacking goes further, arguing that far from being entirely opposed to Kantian thought, “Foucault was a remarkably able Kantian” (Hacking 1986, 238).

²² Foucault insists that in his work “[t]here is no foundational recourse, no escape within a pure form,” since it remains “within the field of immanence” (Foucault 1997a, 55).

²³ According to Thomas Flynn, Foucault takes on the critical task of pointing out dangers in the present that appear to be dangers in the present *to his audience*: “Historico-practical *critique* . . . is both revelatory (factual) and condemnatory (evaluative) in the sense that rhetorically it appeals to a set of values and beliefs that its audience presumably shares, namely, freedom-autonomy, but of whose endangerment it is unaware” (Flynn 1989, 196-197). The situatedness of Foucault’s critique means he does not have to provide any sort of transcendent, universal reasons for it – “Foucault neither offers nor seeks foundations beyond the presumed commitment of his audience to freedom-autonomy” (197). For Flynn, in his genealogical work Foucault is taking up from the Cynics the role of philosophers as “parrhesiasts,” as “speakers of the truth about themselves and others, and about the present situation” (Flynn 1989, 195). The Cynic took on philosophy as an “ethos or life, not as doctrine or universal theory,” an ethos that involves “openness to *new alternatives, new possibilities*” (196, 195).

²⁴ As Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow argue, in his genealogical work Foucault does not place himself in the position of “detached spectator” of the present, because, for him, “there can be no such ahistorical thinker exercising the ‘intellectual’s privilege’ and no such pure discourse” (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983, 103, 96). Instead, Foucault “thematizes the fact that he himself – like any other investigator – is involved in, and to a large extent produced by, the social practices he is studying” (103). His criticisms are offered from the position of someone who is involved in that which is under question, but who also “distances himself from it” (124).

²⁵ As Jana Sawicki argues, “[i]n the absence of alternatives to present principles and values governing political struggle, we must continue to appeal to the standards of rationality and justice that are available to us within the specific contexts in which we find ourselves. . . . In other words, appeals to rights, liberties, and justice (and struggles over how to interpret these principles) are not denied to us. These are the only sorts of appeals that make sense to us right now” (Sawicki 1991, 100-101).

²⁶ Daniel Touey argues that Kant, unlike Foucault, “privileg[ed] regions of thinking as immune” to the effects of history; “[h]istory clearly had no internal relationship to reason in Kant’s view – reason can be realized in history, but cannot itself have an historical structure” (Touey 1998, 101). The notion of the philosophical thinker standing outside of history while using universal reason is still strong, and it is this that I think Foucault is trying to combat by arguing that in some of his work Kant also tended towards thinking *within* his own history. However, I agree with Touey that ultimately, “it would be a mistake to attribute to Kant an understanding of history that elevated it to the same level as reason, or allowed for a mutually constitutive relationship between them” (101). Insofar as this is what Foucault’s return to Kant implies, I think he is mistaken. However, Foucault is quite clear that he is not concerned so much with producing discourse and critique that is *true* as that it is effective in producing transformation in himself and his audience. Thus, for example, in regard to *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault states: “So here is a book that functions as an experience, much more than as the demonstration of a historical truth. . . . [I]t is evident that in order to have such an experience . . . it is necessary that what it asserts is somehow ‘true,’

in terms of historically verifiable truth. But what is essential is not found in a series of historically verifiable proofs; it lies rather in the experience which the book permits us to have. And an experience is neither true nor false: it is always a fiction, something constructed” (Foucault 1991, 36). Thus, I am arguing here that even if Foucault distorted Kant to some degree in tracing his intellectual lineage to him, the point, according to Foucault, is to do so in order to promote an experience in his audience – an experience “that might permit us to emerge from it transformed” (34).

²⁷ Foucault’s return to Kant can provoke us to consider to what degree philosophy for Kant may have been more than a task in which we seek pure knowledge; it may also have been used by him as a means of *acting* in the present, as a way to encourage change for the sake of freedom. If Foucault is right in saying that many aspects of the Enlightenment legacy have *not* promoted such freedom, should we continue to think and speak and act in such ways? Should seeking knowledge for the sake of knowledge alone be the impetus behind our current philosophical thought, or is it precisely the point of Enlightenment philosophy to act in the present and transform society?

Allen Wood supports my claims here when he argues that, for the original Enlightenment thinkers and *philosophes*, rational reflection was closely connected to “self-knowledge for the sake of *action*”: “Reason is a capacity to know the world, but chiefly it is a capacity to *act* in it, and because reason is also oriented toward society, its vocation above all is to *transform the social order* – actualizing the Enlightenment ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity” (Wood 2001, 109, 111; emphasis mine). If this is the case, then by tracing his own critique-as-action back to Kant, Foucault may be indicating to others that this kind of philosophical thought is a legitimate part of Enlightenment philosophy (in which we are still involved), and is worthy of consideration and pursuit.