

Foucault's Apophasis: The Mystery Beyond Modernity

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My usual first line of defence when accusations of 'postmodernism' are levelled at Foucault is pedantic: there is no philosophical 'postmodernism' (with the possible exception of Jean-François Lyotard's thought), and no one who knows what they are talking about suggests Foucault is a "postmodernist." He himself ultimately rejected any possibility of a "postmodern" period or attitude, averring instead that he was actually a partisan of the modern, Enlightenment critical attitude.¹

I must admit though that this dodge is a little disingenuous on my part. After all, I am well aware what people mean when they invoke 'postmodernism' in relation to philosophy. They mean, effectively, a total relativism, one which holds that not only our values but all kinds of truth are historically relative. Foucault's rejection of the label was made at a time when it was only inchoately applied, so he did not really rebut such accusations as they are made today.

Is Foucault not in his historicism about knowledge an archetype of this tendency to relativism? I have always maintained that he is not.² While Foucault does hold that the truth of statements is relative to a framework for their production that is generic to a particular time period, and while he developed the view in the 1970s that this framework relates to political conditions, he never held—as he is often alleged to have—that this means truth is *simply* an historical artefact or an effect of power relations. Rather, Foucault's position is ultimately that there is some extra-linguistic

reality upon which the production of truth depends, and hence that truth claims are not some mere evanescent effervescence produced by history or power, but ultimately do relate to something else. This something else, this exterior outside of language and knowledge, is not something Foucault talks about much, but does occasionally affirm a belief in. The prime instance of this is in the Preface of his 1966 masterwork (and alleged landmark of historical relativism) *The Order of Things*, where he declares that the shifts between the *epistemes*—the changing orders of truth that govern academic discourses during transient periods only to be replaced by other, largely incommensurable ones—occur through an encounter of these orders with a “primary state” beneath the order of truth:

Culture then finds itself faced with the stark fact that there exists, below the level of its spontaneous orders, things that are in themselves capable of being ordered, that belong to a certain unspoken order; the fact, in short, that order *exists*.³

Thus, the eponymous ordering of things in scientific discourses is dependent for Foucault on an order that things themselves have beneath it. This order, crucially, must itself be ineluctable: we cannot make finally true statements about it without doing violence to it (as Foucault says elsewhere),⁴ misrepresenting it to make it fit into the alien order of discourse.⁵ Thus, the truth is only ever obliquely related to the primal.

For Foucault, the truth is historically relative, but only because the truth is something human and inadequate rather than a natural fact. I have argued that in effect Foucault's epistemology is ultimately aligned with that of his contemporary and acquaintance Jacques Lacan, albeit with less focus on the outside, and with a different terminology.⁶ Lacan calls the outside “the real”; what Foucault calls “truth” lies on the side that Lacan calls “the symbolic.” While Lacan like Foucault puts knowledge on the side of symbolic, he is quite inconsistent in his use of the term “truth,” sometimes using it in a similar way to Foucault, aligning it with language, at others aligning it with the real.⁷ Foucault certainly lacks for clarity on this issue himself, which surely has contributed to continuing accusations of postmodernism against him.

In this essay I will describe and critique Foucault's position in relation to truth, through a comparison with apophatic theology, which is to say a negative approach to knowing God that, since we cannot hope fully to understand the divine, focuses instead on what we can say that God is not.

Reading Foucault in relation to apophatic theology is not new. The Jesuit scholar James Bernauer wrote a piece doing this shortly after Foucault's death.⁸ However, Bernauer's extraordinary argument in this direction has never become widely cited, even though his later work on Foucault has been.⁹ His interpretation, moreover, though it is referenced in those later works, is only ever a particular insight within (very erudite) larger surveys of Foucault's thought. Those few scholars who have written on Foucault in the intervening decades that have invoked the spectre of apophatic theology, have not done so in even so concerted a way as Bernauer.¹⁰

Bernauer moreover actively reads Foucault as himself producing a form of apophatic theology with his political thought in particular. I, by contrast, think this exaggerates the apophatic dimension of Foucault's thought; I instead seek to explore the difference between Foucault's admittedly apophatic thought and apophatic theology *stricto sensu*. I will conclude that Foucault is ultimately constrained by his modernism from taking the mystical route that apophatic theology opens, but that his thought nonetheless points away from modernity in such a direction.

The Thought of the Outside

The closest Foucault comes to engaging directly with apophatic theology as such is in another privileged engagement of his with the question of what lies outside language, though a more obscure and oblique one than *The Order of Things*, namely in his contemporaneous essay on the thought of the literary thinker, Maurice Blanchot, entitled "The Thought of the Outside." Here, Foucault in passing considers (and dismisses) a resemblance between his perspective and the thought of Dionysius the Areopagite (whom he calls "Pseudo-Dionysus," using one of the multiple other variant spellings of the author's name, as well as appending the standard academic prefix to signal that this Dionysius is not generally considered to be the same person as the original Dionysius the Areopagite converted by the apostle Paul).

Foucault's main argument in this text locates Blanchot as a figure in a contemporary movement that represents an epochal shift in our relationship to language. This can be related to the contemporaneous epochal shift that Foucault posits in *The Order of Things*, a prospective disappearance of the figure of 'man' that had grounded post-Enlightenment humanism. The unifying abstract moment of these two shifts is the disappearance of the 'subject' (of knowledge, of language) as such. Foucault sees Blanchot, along with others of his ilk, as liberating language from the speaking subject. It is in relation to this contemporaneous movement of profound desubjectivation that Foucault identifies, that he mentions mystical apophatic

theology, but finds it wanting in comparison. Introducing the very idea of thinking the outside of language, before discussing Blanchot, Foucault inveighs that:

One might assume that it was born of the mystical thinking that has prowled the confines of Christianity since the texts of the Pseudo-Dionysus: perhaps it survived for a millennium or so in the various forms of negative theology. Yet nothing is less certain: although this experience involves going "outside of oneself," this is done ultimately in order to find oneself, to wrap and gather oneself in the dazzling interiority of a thought that is rightfully Being and Speech, in other words, Discourse, even if it is the silence beyond all language and the nothingness beyond all being.¹¹

So, Foucault considers but rejects the suggestion that this profound negation he believes to be incipient in the twentieth century could be found in apophatic theology, on the basis that this theology ultimately is self-directed. Foucault is surely ultimately right in this assessment: even though it is a mischaracterisation of Christian ascetic mysticism to describe it as a matter of "finding oneself," it nonetheless involves a kind of personal journey of self-transformation that does not mean completely transcending the self as such so much as changing the self to become (one with) God. By contrast, the desubjectivisation that Foucault envisages on the horizon with the coming death of man would seem to represent a deeper or more total negation.

That the negation performed by negative theology is precisely *theological* is surely determinant of the difference here. If there is a God, then the outside of language is, if not exactly synonymous with Him, then at least closely associated with Him. If, moreover, God has been fully incarnated (in the person of the Word of God) in a man as Jesus Christ, then the appropriate mode of relationship with God is one which must indeed fold back into the body and soul of the individual human being through the use of language. By contrast, what Foucault is talking about seems thoroughly atheistic, indeed to the point that it does not even need to declare its atheism. Foucault himself never indicated the slightest acceptance of any of Christian theology, notwithstanding his perfunctorily Catholic upbringing.¹² This might explain why, at least at a certain point in the 1970s, he gravitated towards Zen Buddhism rather than Christianity: "In Christian mysticism, even when it preaches the union of God and the individual, there is something that is individual."¹³ Total negation of the self is what Foucault has in view, not individual salvation. This paradoxically finds Foucault, the great follower of Nietzsche, tending in the direction (as

Nietzsche's own great inspiration, Schopenhauer, had before him) of what Nietzsche saw as the great nihilistic danger for the West: a European Buddhism.¹⁴

No gravitation towards Buddhism is yet evident in "The Thought of the Outside," however. Rather, Foucault here identifies the true exposé of the outside as someone whom we might regard as the farthest thing from a religious thinker, namely the Marquis de Sade, who for Foucault leads us to the outside by bringing us neither to God nor to negation but to desire. This testifies to a current in Foucault's thinking that will still be prominent a decade later in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*: even though he would there turn vehemently against the concept of desire as such, he nonetheless seeks a kind of supersession of the bonds of such concepts in "bodies and pleasures," seeking an apparently Sadistic exit from "sex" as a concept through sexual practices.¹⁵ For Foucault, the outside of language would thus seem to be a kind of pure experience of materiality. One can relate this – though one should be careful in such instances not to fall into salaciousness – to Foucault's later enthusiasm for the potential for "desubjectivization" offered by anonymous sex in bathhouses as "perhaps not the most radical but in any case sufficiently intense to be worth taking note of."¹⁶

In "The Thought of the Outside," at least, it is literature that Foucault seems to think offers a more radical route. If Sade is important it is not because of any sex he had, but because of the way he wrote about it. On Foucault's account, literature is able to free language from referentiality and hence make language appear as an object in its own right, showing in the process the void that lies behind it, in between it and its supposed referents, lighting a passage to a radically negative outside of discourse.¹⁷

If literature performed this operation for Foucault, then I cannot in principle gainsay his testimony. I do not believe, however, that there is anything about literature (or, for that matter, sex) that generically leads to such an insight: rather, it is the omnipresence of the outside that makes it possible to have this realisation. In Blanchot, Foucault sees a way out of subjectivity in a self-negating discourse lacking in reflexivity.¹⁸ However, there is no inherent difference in this regard between Blanchot's writing and Dionysius the Areopagite's. Indeed, unlike Blanchot, this Dionysius took leave of his own subjective identity through the use of a pseudonym. Foucault's differentiation of the two is thus not based so much on what they wrote as what he takes their historical context to be: where Dionysius's fate was to ground Byzantine practices of the self, Blanchot writes in the time that Foucault sees as representing the final break with subjectivity as such. To quote Foucault against his own argument, however, "nothing is less certain."¹⁹

Foucault is right that, in order to break with our familiar certainties, we require some route out of the circuit of discourse that apparently makes all things seem clear and logical, a kind of discursive escape hatch that itself must be discursive. As Lacan has it, the real itself is apt to interrupt and disturb discourse from without,²⁰ but to make anything lasting out of this, rather than just experiencing a discomfiting moment of doubt, one needs a discourse that will in some sense formalize the revelation, without simply allowing it to evanesce back into the wholeness of settled discourse. While, as Foucault suggests in relation to Blanchot, we cannot properly approach the outside through language, but must find some more primitive route, it is also the case that any kind of sustained approach to the outside must at some point be reterritorialized in language. That is to say, blending Foucault's claims from the Preface to *The Order of Things* with those of "Thought of the Outside," culture regularly encounters order in its primary state, but up until now has been unable to maintain this experience, despite attempts such as apophatic theology. In 1966, Foucault apparently thinks that literature is the privileged vector by which this will happen.

The problem with Foucault's position here is a subtle indistinction between sustaining the apophatic revelation and merely using it to effect a break in one's episteme. In *The Order of Things*, he clearly posits the apophatic as having the latter function: the order of culture comes into contact with a more primitive order beneath it only at the moment at which it yields to a new order of culture. However, in "The Thought of the Outside," he seems to be looking for a break to lastingly abolish the form of the subject, and this I think reveals a positive ("cataphatic") agenda lurking even in the other text, insofar as at the conclusion of *The Order of Things* he envisages a new culture that will lastingly abolish modern subjectivity altogether. In principle, Foucault's enthusiasm for desubjectivization can be understood simply as one for an epistemic break of a particularly radical kind, but the very idea of such a radically negative break seems to me to tend towards the mystical impulse to sustain apophatic revelation, while substituting for mysticism a speculative positive utopianism. Indeed, Foucault's complaint about Dionysius here is apparently not the mysticism that sustains his insights, but rather that neither Dionysius nor the mystics who follow him go far enough in their apophaticism. I take the contrary view, however, that it is precisely necessary to sustain apophatic insights that they become centred on the individual through practices of mysticism, and that Foucault's extreme negativity in fact tends towards a kind of positivism precisely because it obviates this, hoping for historical rather than personal salvation.

The dynamic I am describing between revelation and reinscription is similar to that diagnosed by Friedrich Nietzsche in his literary debut, *The Birth of Tragedy*.²¹

Here, Nietzsche suggests that there is in art a generic tendency, which he calls the Dionysian, to rend "the veil of Maya" and reveal our oneness with one another and with nature, that lurks eternally beneath the artificial individuation we have constructed for ourselves. This non-conceptual force of art, however, gives us an experience that is generally unsustainable, such that, once the Bacchanale is over, our opposite, "Apollonian" tendency reasserts itself and we become ourselves qua individuals once more. Nietzsche does, however, identify a singular great exception in Attic tragedy: the Golden Age Athenians, Nietzsche argues, managed to invent a dramatic form that allowed them to articulate an Apollonian conceptual frame within the experience of Dionysian suspension of individuality, thus attaining a higher understanding of reality than any other culture before or since.

Foucault was of course heavily influenced by Nietzsche, whom he references in both 'The Thought of the Outside' and *The Order of Things*. While Foucault sees Nietzsche as a representative of the great contemporary movement towards the outside, however, he does not yet echo Nietzsche's specific, juvenile assertion that we are eternally chasing an experience found previously among the ancient Greeks, although Foucault will eventually come to echo it in the last phase of his own work. Foucault's fidelity to Nietzsche is at this time rather in his insistent pointing towards something futural *beyond the human*, a major theme of Nietzsche's mature thought. However, his attitude towards subjectivity in this essay seems rather sub-Nietzschean, something like a desire for a sustained Dionysianism that might lastingly destroy individuation, rather than Nietzsche's more subtle solution of a form of individuation that can incorporate an awareness of its own artificiality.

We might ask two questions in relation to this project of Foucault's: 1. can such a lasting desubjectification be achieved? and 2. has Foucault's identified an appropriate route for this? The simple answer to both questions (much as to any question raised about Nietzsche's speculative account of Attic tragedy, since it concerns a dead cultural form) is that we cannot know. We cannot know whether such a thing can be achieved until it is, nor whether any prescribed route can lead there until it is taken. While Foucault's intellectual procedure here might seem impeccably negative, seeking a release from the existing conditions of subjectivity via a discourse that has a void at its heart, he still helps himself ultimately to knowledge of that whereof he cannot know: we cannot know whether desubjectivisation of the type he wants to achieve is possible, and hence his condemnation of Christian apophaticism rests on an unreliable presupposition that it is possible for language-using humanity to achieve something more radically de-individualising .

What Foucault sees as Blanchot's distinctively modern move not found in any pre-modern writing is to point towards the void of language itself as such. This is indeed something quite different from apophatic theology: where negative theology uses language to point to something ineffable beyond language, Blanchot uses language to point to the inherent negativity of its own being. This is an apophatic gesture, in as much as it is purely negative; it is not apophatic, however, insofar as it does not really point beyond language in its negativity, so much as to the negativity invisibly inherent in language, which might imply the existence of something beyond it, but does not actually provide any connection to that outside. It might rend the veil but does not look through the tear: a further step is needed.

Such a step is provided, I will argue, by none other than Foucault himself. He does not generally use language in the highly reflexive way Blanchot does, but rather points to things genuinely outside of language, a "primary state" of order being the prime example of this. It is thus actually Foucault, rather than Blanchot, who indicates a more radical passage to the outside. The problem is that Foucault—perhaps due to his typical humility and self-effacement—does not seem to cognise the profundity of his own manoeuvre in this regard vis-à-vis the relatively limited one he is panegyrising in Blanchot. The idea that there could be a long-lived discourse that cuts through to the real (much as Nietzsche thought Attic tragedy could) does not seem to occur to Foucault. Such a possibility is not formally excluded by his schema, but it nonetheless sits ill with the extent to which he suggests the impossibility of escaping the historically constituted constraints of discursive formations. The essential problem for Foucault with apophatic theology is thus that he cannot allow that there is any discourse that transcendentally rises above its historical conditions of production: the works of Dionysius are marked ineluctably by their status as artefacts of a particular historical episteme. By contrast, the thought of Blanchot can be seen as genuinely radical because it is new and therefore can be identified with the cusp of a novel episteme.

One can discern two distinct moments in Foucault's thought in these texts, one apophatic, the other eschatological, or even, frankly, millenarian. The second moment, most visible in "The Thought of the Outside," is a carrying over into a new register of the impulse of Marxism: it's a yearning for revolution, which in 1966 Foucault has transposed back from Marxist materialism into an idealist register, which is to say, into the symbolic itself; later, in the 1970s, this moment in his thought, in communication again with Marxism, would return to a kind of materialist register, before disappearing in the last phase of his thought.

Eschatology is a relatively minor moment in Foucault's thought, however, that figures, I would suggest, as a more or less accidental excess of cataphatic

enthusiasm on his part. His apophaticism is far more consistent, prominent, and essential. Radical annihilation in the passage to the outside is not what Foucault argues for ultimately. Rather, bodies and pleasures, for example, figure as a *point d'appui*, a pivot that can be used to pass from one *episteme* to another.²² This does leave us, then, with something like a caricature of “postmodernism,” in the form of an epistemic relativism: we can only ever achieve the passage from one knowledge to another; nothing more radical is possible except in the evanescence of the passage.

However, Foucault's intent does not seem so nihilistic, even if it is thoroughly negative: he wants something he doesn't have, and knows that the status quo must be exited to reach it, but cannot for methodological reasons ascribe any positive content to what lies on the other side, since he cannot know what it is. This is precisely what leads him to fall into the paradoxical trap of a negative cataphasis wherein he cathects a pure nullification of something into a utopian vision. As Nietzsche says, “the human will . . . prefers to will *nothingness* than *not will*.”²³ Foucault's orientation in this regard is unsatisfactory in as much as it is premised on the desirability of negating our present society when we cannot possibly have any idea what we are getting ourselves into. This is different to actual apophatic *theology* which offers a way to think about something absolutely other, not to beckon its actualisation (Christians of course do expect the Apocalypse, but don't generally believe themselves to be bringing it about by thinking about it – it must rather also come from the radical outside).

While it is coherent to suggest that, through a negative movement, we might get to a new discursive order that is without subjectivity or individuality in the strong or specific senses in which they exist today, it is naïve to *expect* this.²⁴ Moreover, the specific mechanism by which Foucault thinks this might occur is doubtful. Foucault acts as if the subject and the individual, like man/the human, ultimately exist because we believe they do. He implicitly relies on a naïvely nominalist premise that, because the terms ‘subject’ and ‘individual’ are modern inventions, so must the phenomena they name be.²⁵ While it is reasonable to suggest that subjectivity is modulated by the invention of a concept of subjectivity, the concept might conversely be said to require its referent to exist in order to be able to be coined to name it. Moreover, Foucault in his late work actually comes to assume that subjectivity is as such a very old phenomenon, as indeed he does implicitly in his much earlier claim that Dionysius's first millennium mysticism is really about the individual. By contrast, his contention that “man is an invention of a recent date”²⁶ is rather more sober: it is grounded in an analysis of the operation of the human sciences that plausibly does locate the reflexive consideration by human beings of their own essence as an historically circumscribed episode. It is one thing to want to

sweep away a few centuries of Enlightenment humanism, another to rid oneself of the form of subjectivity that might be as old as history itself. Of course, just because something has existed for a very long time does not mean it cannot or will not cease to exist. However, what Foucault ends up doing in this regard is not merely analysing the contours of history, which is what his archaeology is supposed to do, but advocating for a dubious, radical normative cause.

Whither Apophasis?

Bernauer categorises Foucault's thought as such as 'negative theology' because it rejects an anthropology that at its heart Bernauer argues (following Sartre) is about 'divinizing man' – and hence is itself by contrast actually a cataphatic theology.²⁷ I agree with Bernauer that Foucault is fully apophatic in this regard, if not fully theological. Bernauer goes on to read Foucault's later project of exit from a political reality—rather than just an episteme—also as a negative theology. For all his apophaticism, Foucault's genealogical critiques of strategies of power really cannot be described as theology in an ordinary sense, although this might count specifically as negative *political* or *liberation* theology.

I do not mean this merely as a pedantic objection, but rather want to be clear about the substance of the difference between Foucault and apophatic theology: where Foucault's apophasis seeks to use a *via negativa* to temporarily connect with the outside to destabilise our current certainties and establish a new order in which they no longer exist, negative theology seeks via a *via negativa* to reach the outside in some lasting connection that will transform us in such a way that we can maintain that connection.

What is interesting for me then is the extent to which Foucault unintentionally recapitulates apophatic theology *stricto sensu* by trying to approach what is radically outside thought. The event represented by Foucault and Lacan is in my view not a dissolution of truth, but rather the recognition of the profound power of truth via its radical alterisation, viewing truth as precisely inexpressible and ineluctable, unapproachable and ineffable. It is the birth of a negative epistemology—or, more accurately, its rediscovery, since negative theology already understood this 1500 years ago at least, and indeed had never ceased to understand it, even if Western philosophy became entirely disconnected from it. Indeed, it would seem reasonable and hardly groundbreaking—although quite beyond the scope of this essay—to suggest that this recovery of the apophatic is a major thread in continental philosophy going back at least to Kierkegaard, and perhaps taking in Heidegger.²⁸ This represents, in my admittedly somewhat idiosyncratic view—although one that

has some precursors, particularly the thought of Christos Yannaras—the return of a wisdom repressed in the West during a millennium of rationalist or positivist dogmatics, though leveraging perhaps, in Heidegger's case in particular, the West's indigenous underground mystical–apophatic tradition, as instantiated most prominently in this relation by Eckhart.²⁹ Heidegger is a rare exception in actually being self-conscious about the connection of his thought to this lineage, however. In general, this is not how continental philosophers have tended to see their position and in my view, this is in large part because of their relative ignorance of the apophatic tradition. Foucault, though he declaimed in his last years the influence of Heidegger on his work,³⁰ mentions that tradition directly only once in his entire corpus, and then in a dismissive passing reference that indicates no particular understanding of it. He did in his incomplete dying work—the fourth volume of his *History of Sexuality*, first published only latterly, 34 years after his death³¹—engage with adjacent material, namely the thought of the Church Fathers that he had recently found himself immersed in after relocating his Parisian daily scholarship to a Catholic monastic library. However, due to the remit of his research, he focused only on the attitude to sexuality found in these works; if he found time to attend to the Fathers' epistemology, the evidence of this has yet to come to light.

This is not to invert the accusation that Foucault is a postmodernist into a claim that he was a premodernist. Rather, I am positing a convergence between late twentieth century French thought and something of greater antiquity that is not temporally limited but rather universal, precisely because it touches the reality that underlies all culture, and thus is eternally prone to discovery as such.³² Indeed, apophatic theology has never really been temporally circumscribed, but rather represents a living tradition that might perhaps have first appeared in Greek antiquity but since then has continued or recurred in various different times and periods, at least in its essence.

This mystical kernel or tendency is there also in Foucault's apophatic reflections. He is not a purely negative analyst but approaches mysticism in positing a contact with order in its "primary state." Foucault only approaches this, however, and never becomes a mystic, because he does not positively value a focus on the outside as such, let alone seek to make it durable.

Isn't this abjuration of mysticism in favour of an eternal commitment to the shifting contours of knowledge a defeatism, the kind of sin that Foucault qua "postmodernist" is accused of? There is a kind of paradox of relativism in what Foucault is saying: on the one hand, all knowledge is supposed to be part of an episteme, but somehow Foucault is able to transcend this to obtain an overview of the transition from one episteme to another. That is, Foucault seems in the end to

have discovered a transcendental perspective and truth, paradoxically by forswearing the possibility thereof. Foucault's move is one from knowledge to meta-knowledge, precisely through an apophatic method, but one which nonetheless hopes to produce positive, structural claims, that is, becomes cataphatic. How can he claim to know such things? Is this not simply a reterritorialization at a higher level, a kind of meta-episteme? The short answer, I would proffer, is "no," inasmuch as there are no higher levels of knowledge in Foucault's sense, no "meta-language" as Lacan put it. Foucault has rather touched the real itself through the critique of existing forms of knowledge, but, unlike Lacan, fails to theoretise this contact.

The Return of Spirituality

I have alluded to the fact that Foucault's method shifted significantly in his last work, specifically in the last five or so years of his life, in which his thought refocused on subjectivity, ethics, and antiquity. Foucault does not in this last work tangibly approach mysticism, but I would suggest that the logical confluence of his epistemology and his late thinking about ethics would be a kind of mystical turn.

Foucault's late reflections do see him develop in passing a concept of *spirituality* as "the search, practice, and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth."³³ Here, as with ethics itself (which, for Foucault, is the more general "elaboration of a form of relation to self that enables an individual to fashion himself into a subject of ethical conduct"),³⁴ Foucault believes that modernity has nullified a requisite dimension of human existence. In this, Foucault finally adopts a stance towards modernity that had never before appeared in his thought so explicitly, namely that there is, at least in a very general sense, something about the past that has been lost that urgently needs to be recovered. This is a negative realisation, however, in as much as Foucault gives no content or assurance surrounding the ideas of a necessary new ethics or spirituality, noting only the extent to which certain pseudo-spiritualities of our era, psychoanalysis and Marxism, are not truly up to the task.³⁵

Foucault attributes the decline in European spirituality to Scholasticism, thus originating effectively in Augustine's focus on rationality as the mode of access to God.³⁶ What he does not say, but is implied by this, is that this is a development in Western Christianity, which is generically Augustinian, as opposed to (Pseudo)Dionysian, apophatic Eastern Christianity, which has always abjured a strictly rational approach to God in favour of a direct approach through mystical askesis. The destruction of Christian spirituality within Western Christianity, and the cementing of this destruction through the ascendancy of an atheistic scientism in its

wake, created a situation on Foucault's account where Nietzsche and other German philosophers of the nineteenth century tried to reboot spirituality.³⁷

However, in the East—be it Japan or the eastern fringe of Europe—the same effect never occurred to the same extent. While Western rationalism has been globalised at gunpoint, and has indeed become culturally dominant in Eastern societies, their living traditions of spirituality have not been deracinated from within in the way that they have in the West (indeed, this has never entirely happened in the West either). Foucault touches on the existence of this legacy inasmuch as he notes in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* that one of the earliest apophatic thinkers of the Church, Gregory of Nyssa, engaged in a classical form of spirituality—but he notes neither Gregory's apophaticism nor the survival of his spirituality in the East.³⁸ Rather, when Foucault speaks of the West and East it is in a way that seems to conceive of the entire of Europe and Christendom as on the Western side, and thus as sharing the same spiritual history.

If we combine Foucault's call for a return to spirituality together with his apophaticism, we get a call for a form of spirituality that is appropriate to the apophatic, which is to say, mysticism. Foucault clearly does not do this, but, in my view, it would have been a logical next step for him.

Foucault believed it was necessary to invent a new form of spirituality in Europe, continuing to follow his presupposition that a new historical epoch beckons. However, there is on my analysis no need to invent such a form of spirituality anew, in as much as it exists in multiple forms, including the one that seemed to interest him so much because of its non-Westernness, Zen Buddhism, but also in the form of Eastern Christian traditions.

Still, Foucault is right that "Zen is totally different from Christian mysticism."³⁹ The great difference between these traditions is between Buddhism's attempt to build a spirituality around nothingness, pure negation, and Christianity's constant belief that ultimately there must be some positive focus for faith. While I can hardly seek seriously to stage, let alone decide, a contest between Christianity and Buddhism here, it seems to me that there is at least an intimation in the case of Foucault's thought as we have considered it here that pure negativity cannot work, or indeed cannot really exist. Foucault fails to be entirely apophatic, but rather must posit things and indeed is at his most interesting when he does so. Moreover, this minimal epistemological cataphasis he undertakes is not just a matter of entering a new episteme after the sojourn in the apophatic but does work to sustain apophasis itself.

The point here is one made by Gregory Palamas in his landmark disputation with the Italian monk Barlaam.⁴⁰ Palamas, the defender of Orthodox mysticism, is

faced with arguments attacking the mystical practice of hesychasm from an apparently apophatic perspective that denies any possibility of direct contact with God. The Palamist position is that, while we cannot know the fullness of God, nor even glimpse His essence, so must approach Him apophatically in theory, we can nonetheless have a direct contact with the divine energies. This is not a novel position that Palamas articulates here, though the essence/energies distinction is a novel way to conceptualise it: rather, the basic point is one made insistently and consistently already almost a millennium earlier by Dionysius, that apophasis in theory is a royal road to a more direct connection with the Almighty.⁴¹ I am contending that Foucault's invocation of an encounter with the primary state of order is at least analogous to this mystical position: we can perceive the real as real and, while we cannot produce a theoretical knowledge that understands it adequately, we could theoretise our *contact with it* as a procedure. Even though Foucault does not do this, I would argue that his thought tends in this direction. Foucault tried Zen and apparently chose not to pursue it further, despite at the time announcing an intention to.⁴² Had he not died, but rather continued to live and work day-to-day in the Dominican library the Bibliothèque du Saulchoir, where he had for the last five years of his life while at home in Paris, reading the Church Fathers as he had been latterly, one might speculate that he might have been drawn into the Christian mystical tradition, although any such speculation must remain just that.

Conclusion

Bernauer neatly characterises Foucault's project as not post-modern but *anti-modern*.⁴³ This, ultimately, I think is right. Although we should recognise some tendencies in his thought that are in a sense "post-modern," what this might mean in Foucault's case is certainly not what is popularly imagined (that is, it would here refer to the supersession of modern subjectivity, rather than of truth) and this tendency is a relatively marginal and juvenile one that Foucault abandons by his late work. Indeed, what Foucault abandons in this regard is not just the dream of superseding modernity, but also modernity itself, insofar as this dream was possible only in a frame of distinctly modern progressivism.

Bernauer also points out the crucial fact that Foucault places historical forces above human agency.⁴⁴ Although this is what seems to abandon us to relativism, positing the outside as thus both ineluctably ineffable to and overwhelming in relation to humanity provides the basis for a mysticism, albeit one that Foucault did not begin to construct. The key is to grasp that positing history as a universal force in fact shows that there is something at work that transcends the changes that it allows

us to catalogue, and that there is in the end something Parmenidean about the universal applicability of Heraclitus's insights.

Notes

- ¹ Foucault, Michel. "What is Enlightenment?" in *Ethics* (London: Penguin, 2000), 309.
- ² See in particular Kelly, Mark G. E. *The Political Philosophy of Michel Foucault* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 20–21.
- ³ Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things* (London: Routledge, 2002), xxii.
- ⁴ Foucault, Michel. "Orders of Discourse" in *Social Science Information*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (April, 1977), 22.
- ⁵ Hence Foucault's statement that "connaissance et toujours une méconnaissance." Foucault, Michel. "La verité et les formes juridiques" in *Dits et écrits* Vol. II (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 552.
- ⁶ See Kelly, Mark G. E. (2019). "Discontinuity in Poststructuralist Epistemology: Foucault contra Deleuze and Derrida" in *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, 15(1), 331.
- ⁷ Evans, Dylan. *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), 217–18.
- ⁸ Bernauer, James. "The Prisons of Man: An Introduction to Foucault's Negative Theology" in *International Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (December 1987).
- ⁹ Bernauer, James W. *Michel Foucault's Force of Flight* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990).
- ¹⁰ E.g. Bradley, Arthur. "Thinking the Outside: Foucault, Derrida, and Negative Theology" in *Textual Practice*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2002); Quarles, Stephen. "The Cross and the Abysmal Madness of God: Foucault and Apophatic Theology" in *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (2018).
- ¹¹ Foucault, "Thought of the outside," 150.
- ¹² Macey, David. *The Lives of Michel Foucault* (London: Verso, 2019), 4.
- ¹³ Foucault, Michel. "Michel Foucault and Zen: A Stay in a Zen Temple" in Carrette, J.R. (ed.), 1999. *Religion and Culture: Michel Foucault* (New York: Routledge, 1978), 110–114.
- ¹⁴ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 7.
- ¹⁵ Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: Volume I* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 157.
- ¹⁶ Foucault, quoted in Halperin, David M. *Saint Foucault* (New York: OUP, 1995), 94.
- ¹⁷ Foucault, Michel. "The Thought of the Outside" J. Faubion, ed., *Aesthetics, method and epistemology* (New York: New Press, 1998), 149.
- ¹⁸ Foucault, "Thought of the outside," 152.
- ¹⁹ Foucault, "Thought of the outside," 150.
- ²⁰ Lacan, Jacques. "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire" in *Écrits* (New York: Norton, 2006), 675.
- ²¹ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy* (Oxford: OUP, 2000)
- ²² For my full discussion of this passage and its meaning see Kelly, Mark G. E. *Foucault's History of Sexuality Volume I, The Will to Knowledge* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 117.
- ²³ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, 68.
- ²⁴ Christians might themselves expect a kind of radical elision of individuality in the afterlife, but this is precisely an existence outside of the recognisable order, an existence in the outside.

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- ²⁵ Foucault, Michel. "The Return of Morality" in Lawrence D. Kritzman (ed.), *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture* (New York, Routledge, 1988), 253.
- ²⁶ Foucault, *Order of Things*, 422.
- ²⁷ Bernauer, "The Prisons of Man," 376.
- ²⁸ Brown, Nahum and J. Aaron Simmons (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Negative Theology and Philosophy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).
- ²⁹ On Heidegger and Eckhart, see Ian Alexander Moore, *Eckhart, Heidegger, and the Imperative of Releasement* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2019).
- ³⁰ Foucault, "The Return of Morality," 250; Foucault, Michel. *Hermeneutics of the Subject* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 189.
- ³¹ Foucault, Michel. *Confessions of the Flesh* (New York: Pantheon, 2021).
- ³² In this regard, I would like to mention some groundbreaking recent scholarship on the relationship of late twentieth century French "theory" and apophatic theology, viz. Hewheiser, David. *Hope in a Secular Age: Deconstruction, Negative Theology, and the Future of Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Waitz, Carl and Theresa Clement Tisdale. *Lacanian Psychoanalysis and Eastern Orthodox Christian Anthropology in Dialogue* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021).
- ³³ Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 15.
- ³⁴ Foucault, Michel. *The Use of Pleasure: Volume 2 of The History of Sexuality* (New York: Random House, 1985), 251.
- ³⁵ Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 29.
- ³⁶ Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 26.
- ³⁷ Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 28.
- ³⁸ Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 10.
- ³⁹ Foucault, "Michel Foucault and Zen," 112.
- ⁴⁰ Palamas, Gregory, *The Triads* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1983).
- ⁴¹ Pseudo-Dionysius Aeropagite. *The Divine Names and The Mystical Theology* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1999).
- ⁴² Foucault, "Michel Foucault and Zen," 114.
- ⁴³ Bernauer, "The Prisons of Man," 377.
- ⁴⁴ Bernauer, "The Prisons of Man," 378.