

Personal Details

Principal Investigator	Prof. A. Raghuramaraju	Department of Philosophy, University of Hyderabad
Paper Coordinator	Prof. P. R. Bhat	Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, IIT Bombay
Content Writer	Dr. Siby K. George	Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, IIT Bombay
Content Reviewer	Dr. Abey Koshy	Department of Philosophy, Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady
Language Editor	Miss Chitrlekha Manohar	Freelancer, Chennai

Description of Module

Paper Name	Philosophy
Subject Name	Epistemology I
Module Name/Title	Michel Foucault's Epistemology
Module ID	2.39
Pre-requisites	Undergraduate degree or comparable grasp of philosophy
Objectives	To expound the epistemological tenets of Michel Foucault's philosophy of power
Keywords	Power; Knowledge; Truth; Discourse; Science; Realism

Michel Foucault's Epistemology

Introduction

The name of Michel Foucault (1926-1984), French philosopher, social theorist and public intellectual, is associated most with the concept of power and politically charged critiques of several accepted modern claims of truth and knowledge. Understanding him as an epistemologist in the traditional sense, thus, is beset with difficulties. On the other hand, several aspects of the approach to knowledge in continental philosophy find their most radical and socio-politically relevant expression in Foucault's writings. Continental epistemology since Heidegger is anti-representationalist, anti-Cartesian and historical, and we find the same in Foucault's understanding of knowledge and truth. Because continental epistemology rejects the modernist conception of knowledge as ahistorical representation, it is often suggested that continental philosophy is anti-epistemological.

This, however, is the case only if we accept without question the idea that knowledge as such is justified true belief, which is an ahistorical, clear and distinct representation. If we, on the other hand, take epistemology to be "a normative inquiry into the categories of knowledge, truth, justification, and belief" (Alcoff 2013, 207) without committing ourselves beforehand to Cartesian representationalism, it is not difficult to see that Foucault has important critical contributions to make to epistemology. Like most other continental philosophers of the twentieth century, Foucault is trying "to reveal a *positive unconscious* of knowledge: a level that eludes the consciousness of the scientist and yet is part of scientific discourse, instead of disputing its validity and seeking to diminish its scientific nature" (Foucault 2005, xi-xii). While traditional epistemology is concerned purely with the consciously represented realm of knowledge, continental philosophers like Heidegger and Foucault are concerned with the background that is constitutive of representational knowledge but is hidden from it. There is thus a steady supply of important scholarship, trying to understand Foucault as a valuable epistemologist (see Rouse 1987 and Alcoff 1993).

In a sense, Foucault's work is mainly about knowledge, but rather than dwelling on the universal and necessary nature of knowledge, his philosophical project was to show "the historical, contingent nature of concepts and practices that present themselves as ahistorical necessities..." (Gutting 2001, 261). According to Foucault, if the Kantian epistemological question was 'what limits legitimate knowledge?', his question is: "in what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory (knowledge), what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints?" (Foucault 1984, 45). However, traditional epistemology forces us to raise questions of relativism and of the legitimacy of unfounded contingent knowledge. These questions are also to be addressed in this lesson.

A useful interpretive lens to study Foucault's epistemology is to focus on his concept of knowledge in his archeological writings of the 1960s and the genealogical writings of the 1970s (the ethical writings of the early 1980s being the third phase of Foucault's works). This lesson will look at Foucault's notions of knowledge, truth and science from the point of view of the hidden background that conditions knowledge.

2. Knowledge

Before coming to Foucault's understanding of knowledge proper, we must keep in mind five central concerns of his studies of knowledge: (i) Foucault's claim in *The Order of Things* (1966) that he is investigating the 'positive unconscious of knowledge' (which he calls *savoir* in French) means that he is dealing with "a kind of thought that makes possible the thought that is able to grasp its object by means of concepts" (Iyer 2014, 4). Traditional epistemologists like Descartes and Kant are solely preoccupied with the latter kind of knowledge (which Foucault calls *connaissance* in French), whereas Foucault and others like Heidegger are interested in *savoir*, which makes *connaissance* possible. (ii) This kind of knowledge or thought that Foucault has in mind is not knowledge in its universal, unchanging, timeless essence (as, say, the Platonic concept of knowledge as 'justified true belief' is) but it is knowledge in its changing, historical meaning. Foucault is studying the general feature of knowledge which makes it very specific and historically contingent. (iii) In his historical studies of knowledge, Foucault is not dealing with the historical progress of knowledge in a Hegelian sense; rather, he is dealing with the underlying knowledge-generalities that change in history but not in a linear and progressive fashion but in a discontinuous and rupturing fashion. He thus replaces "the continuous chronology of reason, which was invariably traced back to some inaccessible origin" with "scales that are sometimes very brief, distinct from one another, irreducible to a single law, scales that bear a type of history peculiar to each one, and which cannot be reduced to the general model of a consciousness that acquires, progresses, and remembers" (Foucault 1972, 8). In doing so, he is also adopting the methodological precaution not to regard one's historical era as "the outcome of a teleological progression... which prevents one from assuming that what we have is better than—or more than—in the past" (Foucault 1980 49). Foucault wants to avoid both chronological continuity in history and valorization of one's historical era and its knowledge-generalities. (iv) His concern with unconscious and underlying historical knowledge-generalities is not a concern with unearthing a hidden, commonly inaccessible historical meaning through deep hermeneutics as in Heidegger and Gadamer or a concern with the underlying meaning structure that holds up our everyday practices as in Charles Taylor. He is, rather, concretely analyzing historical development of present knowledge-generalities and is interpreting these developments with a practical concern in mind (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982, xxii). (v) The unconscious knowledge-generalities that Foucault speaks about cannot

be understood in terms of a representing, meaning-constituting transcendental subject of Husserlian phenomenology or subjective capacities as such. This implicit knowledge is not distilled out from universal patterns of the subject or mind but from “all that ‘contains thought’ in a culture, of all in which there is thought. For there is thought in philosophy, but also in a novel, in jurisprudence, in law, in an administrative system, in a prison” (Foucault 1998, 267; see also Iyer 2014, 4).

In *The Order of Things*, “Foucault offers a global analysis of what knowledge meant—and how this meaning changed—in Western thought from the Renaissance to the present. At the heart of his account is the notion of representation” (Gutting 2014). Foucault calls ‘episteme’ the implicit knowledge-generality, which is the condition for the possibility of epistemic knowledge of the various historical epochs. “In any given culture and at any given moment, there is always only one *episteme* that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in a practice” (Foucault 2005, 183). It is episteme that makes it possible for us to speak of the true and the false, the scientific and the unscientific.¹ Epistemes are the basis of discourses, which are more definable fields of knowledge “made up of the totality of all effective statements (whether spoken or written) in their dispersion as events and in the occurrence that is proper to them” (Foucault 1972, 26-27). Discourse is said to be “merely representation itself represented by verbal signs” (Foucault 2005, 90). Modern subjectivism since the classical age transformed reality into sign and representation. In *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1969), Foucault speaks of not *epistemes* but ‘discursive formations’, in order to steer clear of the sense of episteme as worldview or a ‘slice of history’ (1972, 191). Here, discursive formations are said to be noticeable regularities, order, correlations, positions, functionings and transformations between objects and types of statement (1972, 38). Hence, discursive formations are the already sedimented configuration of meanings, which are subjected to certain ‘rules of formation’ that condition existence, coexistence, maintenance, modification and disappearance in relation to a given discursive formation. The tolerance of contradictions in a discursive formation is the mark of its stability. Reality appears as discursive representations arising out of discursive formations. The study of such discursive formations or epistemes is called archeology. The archeological method of *The Order of Things* and *The Archeology of Knowledge* addresses itself “to the general space of knowledge, to its configurations, and to the mode of being of the things that appear in it (2005, xxv).

¹ Although in 1966 in *The Order of Things* Foucault writes that there can only be a single episteme, he later clarified in 1968 that in a given culture different epistemes may be at play. He clarifies that “the *episteme* is not a sort of grand underlying theory, it is a space of dispersion, it is an open and doubtless indefinitely describable field of relationships... the episteme is not a slice of history common to all the sciences: it is a simultaneous play of specific remanences... The episteme is not a general developmental stage of reason, it is a complex relationship of successive displacements... I have collated different discourses and described their clusters and relations. Wherever it seemed necessary, I have been prepared to add to the plurality of distinguishable systems” (1991, 55).

Foucault's archeology of knowledge in *The Order of Things* discusses three discursive formations of Western history in the age of Renaissance, the classical period and the contemporary period, stretching from the end of the eighteenth to the first half of the twentieth century. Now, thought or knowledge in Foucault's sense is not what the subject represents as modern philosophy teaches but is "that space, that region where subjects can encounter objects" (Iyer 2014, 143). This region is an unconscious space wherein we are always already located before we can consciously represent objects on the basis of it. This space of thought undergoes historical and discontinuous transformations. Rather than starting from the representing subject, Foucault starts from the field of thought/ knowledge or discursive formation and its historical transformations out of which emerge new objects and subjects and new relations between them.²

In the 1970s Foucault is said to have moved from the archeological to the genealogical method. The genealogical method is said to be giving primacy to praxis over theory, and abandoning the posturing of the theoretician's detached, quasi-transcendental archeological position (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982, Chapter 4). More clearly, genealogy is an attempt to show that "a given system of thought (itself uncovered in its essential structures by archaeology, which therefore remains part of Foucault's historiography) was the result of contingent turns of history, not the outcome of rationally inevitable trends" (Gutting 2014). Genealogy deals with the same strata of knowledge but does so in the recognition that mechanisms of *power* ineluctably play their crucial role in determining what is true and false knowledge (see the 1970 essay "Discourse and Language" in Foucault 1972). The genealogical writings concentrate on the socio-cultural practices and disciplines strongly placed at the interface of power and knowledge. Hence, in order to delineate the terrain of study, the terms episteme and discursive formation are replaced with apparatus (*dispositif*), which includes discursive as well as non-discursive practices that bring together analyzable formations of knowledge and power (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982, 121). "The apparatus is thus always inscribed in a play of power, but it is also always linked to certain coordinates of knowledge which issue from it but, to an equal degree, condition it. This is what the apparatus consists in: strategies of relations of forces supporting, and supported by, types of knowledge" (Foucault 1980, 196).

² In *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault defines knowledge in the following way: "This group of elements, formed in a regular manner by a discursive practice, and which are indispensable to the constitution of a science... can be called knowledge. Knowledge is that of which one can speak in a discursive practice... the domain constituted by the different objects that will or will not acquire a scientific status... knowledge is also the space in which the subject may take up a position and speak of the objects with which he deals in his discourse... knowledge is also the field of coordination and subordination of statements in which concepts appear, and are defined, applied and transformed... lastly, knowledge is defined by the possibilities of use and appropriation offered by discourse... There are bodies of knowledge that are independent of the sciences... but there is no knowledge without a particular discursive practice; and any discursive practice may be defined by the knowledge that it forms" (1972, 182-83).

Hence, in the archeological writings Foucault teaches that the implicit knowledge that gives rise to epistemological knowledge cannot be studied if we start from the notion of meaning as reference, representation or intention. Archeology, rather, unearths the rules that implicitly guide referential, representational and intentional meaning that play in discourses that are formations of meaning produced by epistemes, which are the final bases of meaning and truth. Genealogy, on the other hand, unearths apparatuses of power/knowledge wherein power and knowledge are mutually intertwined. Power, which is not merely about control and domination but is also about the production of knowledge and subjectivity, resides not in individual subject but in social relations.³ Discourses emerge in the spaces of power but power cannot be exercised except through knowledge. Thus Foucault writes in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) that the purpose of the modern apparatus of legal knowledge was “not to punish less, but to punish better... to insert the power to punish more deeply into the social body” (1995, 82). In writing so, what is knowledge for Foucault? It is “a matter of the social, historical and political conditions under which, for example, statements come to count as true or false” (McHoul and Wendy 1993, 29).

3. Truth

In such a kind of understanding of knowledge, what would be the status of the epistemological question of truth? Foucault’s view of knowledge was sometimes considered “hopelessly subjective” (Putnam 1981, ix). He was bothered by the fact that his view was commonly taken to mean that knowledge was nothing but power or mask of power. He clarifies that what he in fact meant was that institutional spaces are spaces of power and are bound up with different forms of knowledge, the relations between which can be systematically pointed out (Foucault 1988, 264-65). Foucault declares that his project was “to write the history of the relations between thought and truth; the history of thought as such is thought about truth” and derides as “simplistic” the view that for him truth did not exist (1988, 257).

However, an important aspect of Foucault’s mature thought is the claim that “truth isn’t outside power, or lacking in power” (1980, 131). In the 1976 interview “Truth and Power”, Foucault gives a straightforward explication of the relation between power and knowledge. With regard to knowledge, he rejects the notion of ideology for three reasons: because it is posited in opposition to what is supposed to be pure truth, because it refers to the notion of a subject, and because it is considered secondary to the

³ Foucault writes in *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1: “It seems to me that power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies” (1978, 92-93).

materialist and economic base that props it up. With regard to power, he rejects the notion of repression because it does not help us understand ‘the productive aspects of power’. Power is not only about prohibition and coercion. We consent to and accept power not because it forces and prohibits but because “it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse” (Foucault 1980, 119). Power is negatively repressive but positively it is ‘a productive network’. That is, claims of validity arise from apparatuses of *savoir*, which are enmeshed in dynamically constraining and producing structures of power, and which historically arise and disappear in a contingent, non-necessary sense. He goes on to say that truth is not the result of privileged enlightenment but “is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint” (1980, 131). In its turn, truth ‘induces regular effects of power’. Every society has its ‘regime of truth’ and ‘general politics of truth’. The intertwining of power and knowledge in a society creates what can function as true, the rationale for distinguishing true and false statements, the mechanisms for discerning truth and falsity, the approved techniques and procedures for acquiring truth, and the status of persons sanctioned to pronounce the true. Truth is produced by a system of power which is fostered and extended by the effects produced by truth. Truth itself thus becomes “a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements” (1980, 133). The philosopher’s job is to point to the possibilities of the new regimes of truth rather than changing people’s ideas and consciousness, for truth is produced in political, economic, institutional regimes. Hence, Foucault’s call is to abandon the imagination of truth as something that occurs only when power relations and interests are suspended. Power “produces knowledge... power and knowledge directly imply one another... there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (Foucault 1995, 27).

What then happens to the normative/ epistemological notion of truth is an important consideration in relation to Foucault’s interesting idea of power/knowledge. Truth, thus, is not a universal essence that is out there for erroneous minds to clear their errors but is a dynamic event of power/knowledge that produces realities and subjects. This does not mean that Foucault is advocating epistemological nihilism. While advocating the rupture rather than further consolidation of power/knowledge frames and thinking differently from consolidated frames of power, Foucault is not saying that “truth is mere illusion, or arbitrary, or that it does not refer to a shared, extra-discursive reality” (Alcoff 2013, 219). By pointing out the intertwinement of power and truth, Foucault is articulating a version of the coherentist notion of truth (Alcoff 1993, section I). According to Foucault, the ontology of truth and the epistemological criterion of truth cannot be neatly separated. For him, truth is socially constructed and is affected by the play of power. As long as truth is not ‘ontologically independent of human practice’, it is social construction and

arises within structures of power. Hence, scientific as well as social scientific truths are constructions as recent science studies attest. Hence, Foucault's view of truth is asking us to question how some kinds of knowledge are delineated as naïve and unscientific, especially those that are open to interpretation and are related to social institutions, and have the capacity to transform people's lives (like knowledge in the humanities and social sciences). Such knowledges and Foucault's epistemology are considered unepistemological on account of epistemology's taken for granted 'commitment to a universal treatment of knowledge,' which in fact is not necessary for an epistemology. Universal, hegemonic knowledge systems "work through distortions and omissions at the local level in order to enable the reductionist move of containment" (Alcoff 2013, 223). Foucault's genealogical method, on the contrary, strives to "emancipate historical knowledges from that subjection, to render them... capable of opposition and of struggle against the coercion of a theoretical, unitary, formal and scientific discourse" (Foucault 1980, 85). He adds (retrospectively in 1976) that archaeology is the right method for analyzing 'local discursivities' and genealogy is the right strategy for bringing to light the subjected knowledges released by archeological analysis.

Foucault's focus on political power and local concerns clarify his commitment to local knowledges for epistemic and political reasons: "they require less distortion and omission" (=epistemic reason), and "they can allow for a diversity of experience and perspective" (=political reason) (Alcoff 2013, 223). Universal epistemic frames, while claiming political neutrality are not politically neutral, and thus through their politically driven homogenization strategy they trigger distortion and omission. The political and the epistemic, power and knowledge, are intrinsically intertwined and so only an understanding of epistemic normativity which positions itself 'outside all localities' can say that Foucault's conception of knowledge and truth are not normative. Foucault is calling our attention to the dynamic nature of human knowing. For him "[t]o make truth-claims is to try and strengthen some epistemic alignments, and to challenge, undermine, or evade others" (Rouse 2005, 115). In doing so, we can provide normative reasons and evidence from within our locations. These evidences and reasons are situated responses to given configurations of knowledge. We cannot import a principle to judge them from outside our locations. The epistemic status of such a principle would be as contingent as that of any local choices we make. Hence, what is true for Foucault is what a discursive formation, of which power is an integral part, authorizes as true. He does not teach us to accept this given truth as absolute without protest. But in desiring change and transformation, he is asking us to consider what alignment of knowledge and power and their production of truth is most problematic and to make decisions of struggles accordingly.

4. Realism and Science

Foucault's discursive and power-permeated theory of truth has led to the claim that he is a linguistic idealist (the doctrine that truth and reality are productions of linguistic practice). However, Foucault does not hold that variance in discursive formations and relations of power involve linguistic idealism. To say that an anthropological description is a construction in relation to another such description "does not mean that there is nothing there and that everything comes out of somebody's head" (Foucault 1987, 17), Foucault argued in 1984. He is surprised by claims like 'nothing existed' or 'madness does not exist', which are attributed to him. His claim that "knowledge is only established internally within a given problematization or discursive formation is not to say that such knowledge has no empirical grounds, but that these grounds can neither be identified nor judged outside of the contingent conventions of social and scientific practice" (Alcoff 2013, 211). Foucault agrees that there are conceptual formations that are stable across discursive formations, thus concurring with the claim of scientific realism that 'some of what we know will remain stable'. In 1984, he claimed also that his works were problematizations, which are neither representations of preexisting objects nor creations of non-existent objects through discourse. Problematization is "the totality of discursive or non-discursive practices that introduces something into the play of true and false and constitutes it as an object for thought (whether in the form of moral reflection, scientific knowledge, political analysis, etc.)" (1988, 257). This view can be summarized in the following way: our ideas do not constitute the world but our experience of the world is inadequate and cannot form fully developed objects of knowledge. Concepts are bridges between our inadequate experience and fully developed knowledge. Concepts are "contingent guideposts whose functional capacity refers back to our projects or problematizations" (Alcoff 2013, 2012). What is constructed through our discursive and non-discursive practices, our knowledge apparatuses which are inherently entrenched in structures of power, is not the thing as such, but its 'meaning'. Although the meaning of a thing is never totally detached from its reality, what our claims of truth captures of the real is not fictions of language but aspects of the real that cannot be totally and fully captured in our various discourses.

Foucault disavowed the traditional distinction between science and non-science. Like knowledge in general, science too operates with "contingent, constituting concepts, or concepts that constitute the data *as data*" (Alcoff 2013, 2012). There is no realm of enquiry, insulated from history, politics and power. Foucault's original contribution to philosophy of science is his conceptualization of the co-constitutive relationship between power and science, which is traditionally held to be insulated from power, human interest and politics. Concepts and methods of all sciences are historically contingent. History and power influence the relations between scientific objects, the emergence of certain new realities like sexual identities and the practices of the sciences in general. Although Foucault considered

“discourses as generative and not simply organizational,” “this account is not necessarily inconsistent with realism: discourses do not determine the truth-value that any given belief has, but whether it *can* have a truth-value” (Alcoff 2005, 215). Statements depend on discourses but discourses themselves, their objects and justificatory procedures further depend on epistemes or apparatuses. A statement is justified not merely by looking at its referential principle of differentiation, but also at its subject position that can be filled by different individuals, an associated field which is a domain of related statements, and a materiality or substance of possibilities of use and reuse (Foucault 1972, 115). Hence, Foucault extends the basis of justification of a proposition. In short, Foucault gives a fuller account of truth and broader understanding of the sciences. The prestige and validity of a science does not arise from an extra-apparatus system of universal and absolute knowledge but from the apparatus of knowledge from which it arises and from its historical discursive strategies pitched against competing discursive formations.

5. Conclusion

Foucault’s epistemological insight truly shakes the foundations of modern epistemological tradition. The claim to absolute, universal and ahistorical knowledge, which is central to modern epistemology, and the criticism of the Foucauldian notion of power/knowledge is said to be arising from traditional epistemology’s unwarranted claim of “standing outside epistemic and political conflicts to adjudicate the claims competing parties can legitimately make upon us” (Rouse 2005, 108). With the abandoning of this assumption, contingent epistemological frames come to be thought about. Universal, “large, hegemony-seeking theories inevitably promote the distortion or elimination of anomalous or non-conforming particularities” (Alcoff 2005, 218) as the human sciences, the ‘thick descriptions’ of which are allergic to broad generalizations. The human sciences are thus considered unscientific and not knowledge enough according to the modern epistemological frame, although these knowledges as in psychology and law are central to our modern measure of human conduct and control of human behaviour. Foucault’s epistemology honestly faces this situation of denial in the modern culture of knowledge and advocates detecting the most dangerous sedimentations of power and knowledge and struggling against them.