Falsifying Foucault?

> *« Si la connaissance se donne comme connaissance de la vérité, c'est qu'elle produit la vérité par le jeu d'une falsification première et toujours reconduite qui pose la distinction du vrai et du faux . »* **Leçons sur la volonté de savoir**, Gallimard-Seuil, Paris, 2011 (1re éd. : 1971).
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> "*If knowledge is given as knowledge of the truth, it is because it produces the truth by the game of a first, primary falsification renewed again and again which raises the distinction of true and false*" [my translation]. Michel Foucault, **Lessons on the will to know**, Gallimard-Seuil, Paris, 2011 (1st ed .: 1971)

I wonder how can Foucault, who refers to Nietzsche as source of inspiration, speak of *falsification* and deny at the same time objectivity of truth – besides the obvious pun. The challenge of Nietzsche is to contest the objectivity of truth as human desiderata, in such a context Foucault's notion of *falsification* (of what? falsification of an objective reality?) does either make no sense at all or encodes some other meaning beyond being false – a possible reading would be to take it that Foucault means "distortion", or better "will to deceive " we will come to this further on.

Knowledge, Truth-Functionality and Contexts

Jacques Bouveresse ("Nietzsche contre Foucault, la vérité en question", *Le Monde diplomatique*, mars 2016) understands Foucault's dictum as contesting some kind of truth-functional realism in the form incepted by Frege; and accordingly, accused Foucault of confusing knowledge and belief. Bouveresse's argument is an apt analysis of Foucault's remarks from the Fregean perspective, nevertheless, someone more empathetic with Foucault might fight back in the following way: Foucault's remark is about the taking place of a fundamental distortion that *makes up* knowledge as a kind of objective parameter or rationality whereby this knowledge assumes that every object of knowledge has a truth-functional feature.

In that sense, Foucault's remark can be taken not as confusing knowledge and belief but rather as challenging the epistemic approaches to knowledge, as developed by contemporary epistemic logic since Hintikka's *Knowledge and Belief* (1968). This is correct: the notion of knowledge encoded by the modal dressing of Kripke-Hintikka-style assumes truth-functionality. In other words, in the more colourful style of Foucault, traditional approaches to knowledge are guilty of an original sin of *exclusion*, namely the sin of taking it that the main objects of knowledge are propositions and that these are necessarily either true or false (and, I guess, that it is not the case that those objects of knowledge are at the same time true and false). According to this reading of Foucault's accusation, standard epistemologists are guilty of excluding contextual changes, because of the assumption of truth-functionality. However, notice that modal and epistemic logicians of the Kripke-Hintikka-style have the means to incorporate "contextually dependent-truth" in their system in a way that preserves truth-functionality: it is sufficient to formulate propositions as functions dependent upon some index standing for a context (such as time, situation etc.) in such a way that the notion of truth is relativized to a context – such an approach can be called a *semantization of pragmatics*. Truth-functionality still holds, but relative to a given context: for short the truth of a proposition can be provided with some dynamics. Moreover, Johan van

Benthem and his group of Amsterdam incorporated (language) actions into the semantization project – this new perspective is known as the *dynamic turn*. So perhaps, this would be their answer to Foucault's search for a concept of truth that modifies itself through history:

> *« Il s'agirait de savoir si la volonté de vérité n'exerce pas, par rapport au discours, un rôle d'exclusion analogue à celui que peut jouer l'opposition de la folie et de la raison, ou le système des interdits. Autrement dit, il s'agirait de savoir si la volonté de vérité n'est pas aussi profondément historique que n'importe quel autre système d'exclusion ; si elle n'est pas arbitraire comme eux en sa racine ; si elle n'est pas modifiable comme eux au cours de l'histoire »* Michel Foucault, **Leçons sur la volonté de savoir**, Gallimard-Seuil, Paris, 2011 (1re éd. : 1971).

> *« The point is to find out if the will of truth does not exert, in the context of a discourse, a role of exclusion analogous to that which the opposition of madness and reason, or the system of interdicts. In other words, the question is whether the truth is not as profoundly historical as any other system of exclusion; if it is not arbitrary like them at its root; if it is not changeable like them in the course of history »* [my translation]. Michel Foucault, **Leçons sur la volonté de savoir**, Gallimard-Seuil, Paris, 2011 (1re éd. : 1971).

Still, the structure-based conception of "contextually"-dependent-truth offered by the approach to knowledge and belief based on model-theoretical semantics (including it's dynamic version), might not satisfy Foucault's desiderata either: truth-functionality is the main assumption of this new "dynamic" approach to knowledge after all. Notice that according to the *semantization approach* both *the proposition p is known* and *the proposition p is believed* are formulated again as *truth-functional propositions* of the form *Kp* and *Bp* respectively– by the way, this approach makes of the difference between propositions involving believe and those involving knowledge quite of a thin matter.

Thus, perhaps, in some sense, it can be said that followers of the semantization perspective, including those of the *dynamic turn*, are also guilty of the original sin of *exclusion* suggested by Foucault's anathema of *falsification*.

Knowledge and The Temporal Mind

In fact, epistemological antirealism as practiced by constructivists who take exception of Frege's truth-functional approach, share this form of criticism to a truth-functional notion of knowledge. Indeed, constructivists (I plead guilty of collusion with them), who link production of knowledge with construction, do not understand knowledge as knowledge *of* truth (as a kind of object). Moreover, according to constructivists asserting that some proposition is true amounts to the commitment of bringing forward some piece of evidence for the proposition asserted and what counts as a piece of evidence is determined by the proposition at stake (recall that from the viewpoint of constructivists a piece of evidence and the proposition it provides evidence for, both stand in the kind of *internal relation* that links type and token)– so, if *falsification* should make any sense here, what can happen is that something purported to be piece of evidence was not so. Did Foucault contest the third excluded? If truth is linked with knowledge as construction then third-excluded does not hold

in general – Brouwer taught us this lesson 100 years ago. What about non-contradiction? Did Foucault consider these principles to be the same? Falsification (if understood as finding and exhibiting a counterexample) is compatible with the failure of third excluded (and more generally with constructivism), however if non-contradiction does not hold either it is tougher to make sense of it. Paraconsistent logicians dare the step further and propose a concept of knowledge that does not assume the principle of explosion (*ex falso*) either – which allows the formulation of systems where some forms of non-contradiction are not generally valid, though many of them,[1] can be seen as subscribing some many-valued version of the semantization approach.

Be that as it may, this is not what Foucault is after: he seems to say that the very concept of knowledge is essentially bounded to do as *if* the object of knowledge is about truth-functionality: the constructivists notion of knowledge does not render justice either to *the will of making up* that knowledge relates to truth. By a similar token, I guess the many-valued logics of the paraconsistent approach to knowledge (such as *dialetheism*) will also be rejected by followers of Foucault (Foucault did not like dialectics anyway).

The will to knowledge, according to Foucault, amounts to the will to deceive and; if my reading of Foucault is right, this also applies to constructivist (and also to paraconsistent) conceptions of knowledge. Despite the fact that constructivists do not assume that the object of knowledge has not truth-functional nature, they do think that knowledge once established is knowledge and not belief. In some sense, constructivism is even more deceiving, since it does not convey the idea that the notion of knowledge has truth-functional roots, but knowledge, according to Foucault is *falsification* in the sense of making it up that it is about truth understood in a very Platonist manner.

But why is that so? Why is not knowledge what the constructivists propose it to be?: after all constructivists are aware of the “distortion” involved in conceiving knowledge in a purely truth-functional manner.

The Empirical Roots of Knowledge

Perhaps the kind of dynamism displayed by constructivism is not radical enough and a kind of gathering knowledge is searched that is sensitive to *revision-procedures*. The dynamics at work within constructivism is close to Kant's a priori notion of time, a notion in which some forms of necessary knowledge are rooted whereas from Foucault's point of view a conception of time is required that makes the contingency of knowledge apparent.

But then some forms of epistemic dynamic logic, belief-revision and non-monotonic forms of reasoning can happily take the challenge of Foucault's dictum.[2] Notice that on one

[1] I have in mind on one hand the Brazilian school of paraconsistency represented by Walter Carnielli, Marcelo Coniglio and many others that emerged from the work of Newton de Costa, and on the other the *dialethetic* school represented by Graham Priest and Francesco Berto, whose work is rooted in the work of the late Richard Routley Sylvain.

[2] This kind of objection to the standard approaches to knowledge echoes those of C. Perelman/ L. Olbrechts–Tyteca (1958) and S. Toulmin (1958) , who assumed a gap between every-day reasoning, closer to legal reasoning, and scientific reasoning based on mathematics. The main claim of Perelman and Toulmin was that both paradigms are incommensurable, since the legal paradigm makes use of the notion of *formality*, that has a procedural nature with roots on a conversational and dialectical practice, and logic is based on the notion of *form*, that involves static (and syntactic) features. The upshot was: argumentation and mathematical logic

hand the epistemic approaches of dynamics logic studies reasoning in a broad framework where information flow and communication extends the standard perspective on knowledge and logic by the intertwining of actions and propositions; on the other argumentative frameworks for defeasible and non-monotonic reasons offer quite a large spectrum for more dynamic approaches to knowledge.[3]

If belief-revission in all their multifarious varieties still look to "formal", "idealized" or "transcendental" perhaps more empirical-sensitive perspectives such as the ones that Quine baptized as *naturalized epistemology* might do?

Naturalized epistemology as nowadays defended by John Woods and others researchers bring forward the thesis that knowledge and logic should be studied under the empirical background of cognitive science: psychological conditions should provide the *empirical checkout counter* (to use John Woods's own words) to test any theory of knowledge and reasoning that does not drop out the real human reasoner.

Notice that according to the approach of a naturalized epistemology the Duhem-Quine-thesis that sentences of a theory have their meaning and evidence only as an interrelated set, paves the way to the thesis that justification can only be had from within science so that this plus non-analyticity is sufficient to undermine traditional epistemology's attempt to justify knowledge-claims from some ground *outside science*: knowledge claims are only *justified within science (*cf. H. Siegel (1984), "Empirical Psychology, Naturalized Epistemology and First Philosophy", pp. 667-676).

So, this might come close to Foucault's objection to "standard" epistemology. If this is a way to follow by Foucaultian Epistemologists they might need, mutatis mutandis; to answer to Siegel's (1984, p. 676) challenge who points out that empirical examinations, such as those provided by psychology (or we might add of sociology); will tell us at best about the causal generation and acquisition of scientific beliefs (justified and not justified) even granting the move that justification takes place within science. Thus, according to Siegel, we still need some method of justification beyond the one based on the empirical standards (of psychology), even in the sense of naturalized epistemology: since naturalized epistemology justify some of their theses by non-naturalizing ways. Siegel's challenge does not only bring up back to the discussion the distinction between context of discovery and justification that underlies Bouveresse's harsh objections against Foucault's notion of knowledge and truth; but it also suggests that the question is still begging.

Let me point out that if we would like to have a dynamic framework, where no Fregean-truth-functionality is assumed and that allows content-based reasoning sensitive to changes, the dialogical approach to Per Martin-Löf's Constructive Type Theory, where the

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provide essentially different forms of reasoning. But, as pointed out by van Benthem (2009), Perelmann's and Toulmin's arguments against logic were born from both, their dissatisfaction with the logic we nowadays call classical first order logic (FOL) and their *unawareness* of the developments in logic of their time. Indeed, by 1960 the old links between logic and argumentation experienced new and thriving impulses that started with the work of Paul Lorenzen on dialogical logic and the one of Erik Krabbe on the *logic of dialogues* (that also has its origins in Lorenzen's (1958) *Logik und Agon* and its further development by Kuno Lorenz (cf. Lorenzen/Lorenz (1978)) – the latter are related to belief-revision and defeasible argumentation.

[3] The *Argumentative frameworks*-approach was launched by the landmark-paper of P. M. Dung: "On the acceptability of arguments and its fundamental role in nonmonotonic reasoning, logic programming and n-person games. Artificial Intelligence", vol. 77, pp. 321–357, 1995.

play level cares of revisions and material bounds of "real players" and the strategy level for the abstract normativity of an ideal player, seems to fill up the gaps that Foucault, if we understood him rightly, finds in traditional conceptions of knowledge.

Now, if the point of Foucault is to reject conceptions of knowledge based on truth-functionality, but also those that assume different forms of temporality and sensitivity to contexts and focus on structuring flow of information, and those as the dialogical framework that stresses the procedural constitution of meaning and knowledge rooted on the interface pragmatics-semantics one wonders what is he looking for.

At this point of the discussion, it seems as if Foucault's use of *falsification* either begs the question or is contradictory. Or perhaps the contradictory formulation is a way to display his criticism. Perhaps we should look for a broader answer to Foucault's question.

Empirical Socio-Economic Conditions and Knowledge as a Norm: An Internal Relation

Indeed, someone closer to the style of philosophy practiced by Foucault than those developed by epistemic-approaches to knowledge and reasoning within natural and social-sciences, might simply refuse to study epistemology as linked to the conceptual (logical) analysis of knowledge naturalized or not. In such a case, I guess, the idea is that what Foucault is expressing is the rather broad thesis that what counts as rationality and knowledge is determined by a "paradigm" (if I may deploy this notion not genuine to Foucault's own rich vocabulary). To put it in the words of Gary Gutting (2013):

> *Rather than asking* [as Kant did] *what, in the apparently contingent, is actually necessary, he* [Foucault] *suggests asking what, in the apparently necessary, might be contingent. The focus of his questioning is the modern human sciences (biological, psychological, social). These purport to offer universal scientific truths about human nature that are, in fact, often mere expressions of ethical and political commitments of a particular society. Foucault's "critical philosophy" undermines such claims by exhibiting how they are just the outcome of contingent historical forces, and are not scientifically grounded* (Gary Gutting (2013), "Michel Foucault"; entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*).[4]

By these lights Foucault's proposal might be read as establishing an **internal relation between some specific form of rationality** (what I called *rationality paradigm*) **and the empirical (social-, economic-,and cultural-) conditions that lead to *impose* it as a norm of knowledge** (or decay): ***knowledge is*** (exercising) ***power***. If that is so, Foucault's proposal goes far beyond naturalized epistemology and it surpasses the framework of Thomas Kuhn by seeking to implement in a quite radical way , based on empirical sociological studies, the perspectives of Paul Feyerabend again and again. From this perspective, the political agenda of imposing one specific form of rationality is, as mentioned above, inseparable (internally related) of the emergent notion of knowledge. Why not? *Sociology of Science* and the *ways of its institutionalization* can be interesting and challenging – if we keep in mind what its scope

[4] Notice that Gutting's formulation might raise the objection that it assumes that there is something like an objective "scientific grounding". The only way I can see to make sense of this formulation is to assume that there are some "hard" sciences that provide the standards of scientific grounding. This would water down quite strongly the claims about the originality of Foucault's perspectives on knowledge and truth.

is and if we are interested in studying issues such as the socio-economic conditions that lead to, say, the postulation of the axiom of choice as an axiom, its first rejection and further endorsement; or, to mention one more case, the structural conditions that promoted the raise of Foucault Studies in French Universities.

Conclusion:

Perhaps, Foucault's observation amounts to the simple remark that some of the so-called *scientific justifications* of institutionalized qualifications and anathemas that have important political and socio-economic consequences such as those involving notions as health, disease, or gender do not have the scientific backing they are purported to have (now *scientific backing*, I guess, must be understood in a rather standard or naïve sense of distinguishing between sciences and pseudo-sciences). This might in some sense be a sensible reflection, and it must be conceded that Foucault had the merit of undertaking extensive and thorough examinations of archives, protocols and reports buried in institutions of various kinds which animated his legendary charming style of writing. Of course, this is quite far away from constituting a revolutionary assault on the notions of (scientific) truth, knowledge and meaning, but, one can say, I think, that his work motivated and still motivates some new approaches to the study of institutional archives.

If the reading proposed in the preceding paragraph seems a too meagre result and we are prepared to read Foucault's remarks as involving more thorny epistemological matters, there are of course other ways to delve into them:

> On one hand I allow me to suggest studying the sceptics of the ancient Greek tradition, or the study of analogical dialectical reasoning within the Arabic Jurisprudence theories of the Middle-Ages (or more generally their theory of Argumentation that has been largely ignored also by the analytic approaches to Argumentation theory and Epistemic Logic), or if one dares to go so far the millenary Jain epistemological lessons on the *Art of the Point of View* provide plenty to learn from (this constitutes another gap in the recent studies on reasoning and knowledge).
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> On the other one cannot escape the feeling that claims as those of Foucault, though they might be seen as involving interesting questions, many of them have been brought forward without awareness (or perhaps even because of lack of awareness) of the discussions that took place in depth and length in philosophy of logic and knowledge – moreover, as a quick look on nowadays publications bring to the fore, such kind of discussions are nowadays experiencing a creative impulse at a breath-taking pace (particularly so in the context of social sciences).[5]

True, analytic philosophers and some philosophers of logic stemming from analytic philosophy quite often ignore history of philosophy or even the history of the science they are purported to study, or more generally philosophical approaches foreign to their own framework – with the result that quite often they produced a rather superficial analysis of the

[5] Of course, I am emulaing here van Benthem's (2009), criticism to Pereleman's and Toulmin's objections to the offsprings of Frege's logic.

links between knowledge and truth – however, this only points out, that it is time that we start learning each from the other

Am I *falsifying* Foucault? Who knows …

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