

Wrong Turns on the Way to the Graveyard: The Death of Man and the Status of the Subject in Foucault Studies

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Abstract

There exists, within Foucault studies, a widespread, misleading and unrecognized conflation of the deaths of man and the subject in Foucault's thought. The treatment of these notions as interchangeable has, in turn, given rise to a confused discussion of Foucault's departure from and return to the subject. This paper considers the discussion of the deaths of man and the subject within Foucault studies and seeks to clarify this discussion in the context of Foucault's own works. In so doing, this work seeks to demonstrate the confusion with which these terms are used in the literature and the misunderstandings of Foucault's broader thought that arise from that confusion, specifically with respect to the creation of a largely fictional Foucauldian "departure from and return to the subject."

Despite the wealth of critical literature dealing with Foucault's account of the deaths of man and the subject, this area of inquiry continues to be a subject of confusion within Foucault studies. Indeed, much of the literature on the topic (or rather, topics) in question is strangely at cross-purposes. This difficulty is attributable in part to Foucault's varied use of the term subject at different points in his career. Likewise problematic is the interchangeable employment, by a number of commentators, of the terms "death of man" and "death of the subject." Taken together, these two issues have given rise to a whole body literature dealing with the supposed departure from and return to the subject by Foucault. Upon investigation, however, it will become apparent both that Foucault's use of the term subject refers to different if not entirely unrelated ideas within his thought and that, furthermore, these differences and the failure to recognize them have resulted in the misleading identification of the subject with man and the resulting development of a largely misguided inquiry into Foucault's supposed departure from and return to the subject.

In much of the critical literature, the death of the subject and the death of man are used interchangeably. Durfee, in a display of what he clearly feels is dramatic repetition, says "man is dead... there is no primacy of the subject, in fact there is no subject... For those

who may be amazed by such a suggestion, let me repeat it loud and clear, there is no subject!”¹ We see this again in Durfee’s discussion of the death of God, about which he writes “the death of God involved the death of the subject as well... for the death of man is but part of the tragedy of the death of God.”² Throughout his article “The Death of Man” Durfee not only seems to regard the deaths of man and the subject as the same thing but likewise refers to the death of the self as being interchangeable with either concept. While such usage is confusing, we shall see later that it is not indefensible.

More problematic are those works in which regarding the subject and man as identical gives rise to discussions of Foucault’s supposed departure from and return to the subject. Wolin, after a discussion of Foucault’s opposition to man/the subject, suggests that Foucault, driven by his desire to further the political causes he believed in, underwent a change of heart later in life.³ Indeed, Wolin claims that “Foucault himself became frustrated with the antihumanist credo” and “came to realize that much of what French structuralism came to regard as humanist pap retained considerable ethical and political value” as a result of which Foucault apparently reversed his position and embraced the subject/man.⁴

Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, we have those works in which the assertion that man and the subject refer to the same thing in Foucault’s writings is treated as a controversial thesis and, consequently, defended. An excellent example of this treatment is produced by Racevskis in his work *Michel Foucault and the Subversion of the Intellect*.⁵ In that work, Racevskis argues that Foucault treats man as being identical with the subject precisely because he identifies the concept of man as embodying the unity of subject and object.⁶ Furthermore, Racevskis suggests that the subject was produced by

¹ Durfee, Harold, “The Death of Man”, *Philosophy Today*, Summer, 2003, pp. 191.

² Durfee, pp. 192.

³ Wolin, Richard, “Foucault the Neohumanist?”, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 1, 2006.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Racevskis, Karlis, *Michel Foucault and the Subversion of the Intellect*, Cornell University Press, London, 1983.

⁶ Racevskis, pp. 26-28.

and, in fact, requires, the anthropological mode of thought that Foucault identifies with the concept of man. He writes “the status of the subject has traditionally been guaranteed by what Foucault perceives as the characteristically anthropological configuration of Western discourse” and indeed “such a mode of intellectual (as is embodied in the subject) is inevitably anthropological”.⁷ Thus does Racevskis assert that Foucault’s later discussions of the subject can and must be considered in light of his discussion of the death of man.

Likewise significant is Racevskis’ recognition of the different potential uses of the term subject. He observes that subject can refer both to the “embodiment of thought” and something that has been “brought under the authority, dominion, control, or influence of something that, in effect, has the capacity to ‘subject.’”⁸ This observation is in itself instructive and, indeed, will inform much of our inquiry. Racevskis, however, continues with the more easily contestable assertion that

Foucault’s notable achievement is to show that these two aspects do not constitute a contradiction at all, that, taken as the foundation of discourse, the subject is a support on which discourse is erected but that it is, at the same time, dominated and controlled by the same discourse: it is both active agent and an object acted upon. The subject is also an object- it is a product of discourse.⁹

Thus, Racevskis asserts that the subject/man is, even at its most fundamental level, the product of subjectification. This connection between the different uses of the term subject and the assertion of their fundamental unity poses no less of a challenge for our position than does the defense of man/subject identity discussed above.

Shiner too, holds that man and the subject can be identified with each other, and likewise offers a detailed exposition of what he regards as the necessary connection between man

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Racevskis, pp. 25.

⁹ Racevskis, pp. 25-26.

and the subject in Foucault's criticism of phenomenology. Shiner holds that, while Foucault regards man as the subject, there is nonetheless more to the concept of man than such an identification would suggest.¹⁰ To wit, Foucault's identification of man as both subject and object refutes the identification of man as merely the subject, insofar, as that identification ignores man as object. In agreement with Racevskis, Shiner holds that to view man merely as a subject is to neglect the very contradiction at the heart of the concept of man, namely, that between man as subject and man as object.¹¹ Shiner holds that this tension is at the very heart of Foucault's criticism of phenomenology.¹² While this perspective still involve a kind of identification of man with the subject, it nonetheless reveals that man as subject is possessed of certain attributes not necessarily extant in the subject in general.

Thus, the literature we have considered thus far can be said to suggest that man and the subject are the same for Foucault, and/or that his use of the term subject refers either to the same thing in each of his writings or refers to different things that are nonetheless inextricably connected. In some cases, this manifests in an apparent disregard for the very idea of a non-human subject, as is exemplified by Durfee's account. In Racevskis' writings, by contrast, the unity of the subject and man, and the unity of the subject as bestower of meaning and subject as product of subjectification are treated as the controversial arguments that they are and furnished with a defense. Wolin, in turn, reminds us of precisely what is at stake in the interpretation of this topic by positing Foucault's later treatment of the subject as indicative of a dramatic reversal and, even worse, a reversal never acknowledged as such by Foucault himself.

Not all of the literature on Foucault's discussion of the death of man and the subject sees fit to regard those two concepts as identical or to either ignore or conflate the various uses of the term subject in Foucault's writings. Allen suggests that Foucault's treatment of the

¹⁰ Shiner, Larry, "Foucault, Phenomenology, and the Question of Origins", *Philosophy Today*, Winter, 1982, pp. 314-317.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

death of man in *The Order of Things* is merely an analysis of the nature of a very specific conception of the subject, namely, the modern identification of the subject with man.¹³ Allen writes “Foucault maintains that the peculiarly modern, humanist conception of subjectivity is contingent and that its emergence at this particular point in history requires explanation.”¹⁴ Thus, while man is a particular conception of the subject, its death does not necessarily sound the death knell for subjectivity writ large.

On the contrary, Foucault’s discussion of the subject/man is instead intended as being illustrative of a distinction between two sorts of subjects: the subject as constituent and the subject as constituted. Here again we see the distinction alluded to in Racevskis between two types of subject, the thinking thing, and the subjected thing.¹⁵ Allen, however, goes beyond Racevskis’ tacit association of the thinking subject as merely “the self”,¹⁶ instead characterizing the subject as the bestower of meaning.¹⁷ Allen suggests that the death of man is indicative of the death of the subject as constituent, the toppling of man from his privileged place as a sort of ersatz God.¹⁸ This form of the subject, however, is replaced by the subject as subjected, the constituted subject of Foucault’s later writings. Allen clearly views the death of man as a sort of preparation for Foucault’s later work on the subject, as is shown clearly when she writes:

Foucault’s aim is not to get rid of the concept of subjectivity altogether; instead he sets aside any conception of the subject as constituent in order that he might better understand how the subject is constituted in this particular cultural and historical milieu... Foucault’s archeological works attempt to describe discourses without reference to foundational or transcendental conceptions of the human subject. This does not mean that the concept of subjectivity is irrelevant to this project: on the contrary, delineating the ways in which

¹³ Allen, Amy, “The Anti-Subjective Hypothesis: Michel Foucault and the Death of the Subject”, *The Philosophical Forum*, XXXI, No. 2, Summer 2000, pp. 121.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Racevskis, pp. 26-28.

¹⁶ Racevskis, pp. 25-26.

¹⁷ Allen, pp. 122.

¹⁸ Allen, pp. 121-123.

historically specific discourses make possible particular modes of subjectivity is precisely the point of that project.¹⁹

By implication, Allen, while accepting the unity of man and a certain understanding of the subject, denies the identification of man and subjectivity writ large, while likewise denying that Foucault limits his discussion to just one type of subjectivity.

It is important to note the differences between Allen's view and Racevskis'. Despite the fact that Racevskis and Allen both recognize that the subject and man can be conceptually united, Racevskis seems to place a greater emphasis upon the necessity of anthropology for the constitution of subjectivity as such. Allen would, naturally, deny this claim, in favor of the assertion that, for Foucault, man is one sort of constituted subject among many.²⁰ Likewise, while Racevskis and Allen would surely agree that the human subject is a product of subjectification, Racevskis is more inclined to view the analysis of this project in terms of an unconscious self-constitution, while Allen would surely condemn this as an attempt to paint Foucault with a Lacanian brush, to the exclusion of his discussions of knowledge/power and its role in the constitution (and even so-called self-constitution) of the subject.²¹ Thus, despite their superficial similarities, Racevskis and Allen exemplify very different perspectives on Foucault's treatment of man and the subject.

Baker likewise distinguishes between the human subject of *The Order of Things* and the constituted subject of Foucault's later writings. Baker observes "The terms "the subject," "human subject," or "subjects" do not mean the same thing, nor should such be expected every time they appear, are critiqued or deployed."²² Like Allen and Racevskis, Baker identifies the use of "subject" as it refers to both the human subject and that which is a

¹⁹ Allen, pp. 122.

²⁰ Allen, pp. 121.

²¹ Racevskis, pp. 30-34.

²² Baker, Bernadette, "Hypnotic Inductions: On the Persistence of the Subject", *Foucault Studies*, No. 4, Feb. 2007, pp. 134.

product of subjection.²³ Baker likewise agrees that the conceptual death of man paves the way for a new understanding of the subject as produced by subjectifying technologies of power.²⁴

Importantly, however, Baker notes that one of the particular characteristics of the human subject, its status as the unity of subject and object, is not specific to that particular class of subject but rather can exist in other forms of subjection as well. This analysis runs contrary to Shiner's assertion that man's status as subject and object, and the problems arising therefrom, are essential elements of Foucault's critique of the human subject. The difference to note here is that Baker observes Foucault's discussion of self-constitution in his later works as a treatment of a subject as its own object, but does so in a way not permitted the human subject rejected in *The Order of Things*: namely, by considering such self-constitution as being a function of "the truth procedures by means of which it is made necessary." Thus, this understanding of self-constitution avoids the humanist error of attributing human constitution to the 'human as bestower of meaning' to which Foucault objects and as an alternative to which he proffers his idea of subjectification as a function of knowledge/power.

Of course critical literature can only take us so far with respect to its own evaluation. It is now incumbent upon us, then, to evaluate the claims made regarding Foucault's discussion of the subject in light of that thinker's own writings. Considering Foucault's works, we shall evaluate the claims made by the various commentators we have discussed thus far and, in so doing, determine whether many of the projects undertaken by scholars in an attempt to trace and interpret Foucault's discussion of the death of man and the subject have, in fact, been the product of misunderstanding.

Let us first consider the issue of the nature and demise of the concept of man. Firstly, in *The Order of Things* Foucault does indeed characterize the "man as subject" as being the

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

product of something like what he would later call subjectification. Specifically, he asserts that man is “a quite recent creature, which the demiurge of knowledge fabricated with its own hand less than two-hundred years ago.”²⁵ It is important to note that the human subject regards itself as self-creating by virtue of man’s status as the bestower of meaning and that it is this very notion that Foucault criticizes in both *The Order of Things* and his later works on the subject. Thus, while man (prior to his conceptual death) would surely have regarded himself as the embodiment of and precondition for subjectivity writ large (as Racevskis would seem to suggest), Foucault himself instead asserts that man was, from the beginning, the product of (at least some embryonic notion of) what he would later call subjectification and thus can only be regarded as one such product among many (as Allen would suggest).

It is, of course, instructive to note that in his later works Foucault treats man (that is to say, actual human beings, rather than man as an abstract concept) as an object of subjectification and, indeed, identifies doing so as a primary purpose of his philosophical project. Along these lines he writes “I would like to say first of all what has been the goal of my work for the past twenty years... my objective... has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are transformed into subjects.”²⁶ This, of course, is not to be mistaken for a resurrection of the concept of man which, as we have seen, Foucault regards as inert. Rather, Foucault’s usage of terms like “man” or “human beings” instead seems to refer to nothing more particular than such things as they exist as objects of subjectification.

Importantly, however, Foucault does not simply abandoned consideration of the human subject, as discussed and criticized in *The Order of Things*, in his later works. Indeed, Foucault suggests that his attempt to understand the subjectification of man in *The Order*

²⁵ Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, Random House Inc., New York, 1970, pp. 308-309 (Henceforth OT).

²⁶ Foucault, Michel, “The Subject and Power” as found in *The Essential Foucault*, Edited by Rabinow and Rose, The New Press, London, 1994, pp. 126.

of Things is continued in his discussion of care of the self in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*. Along these lines, Foucault tells us

I have tried to find out how the human subject fits into certain games of truth, whether they were games that take the form of a science or refer to a scientific model, or truth games such as those one may encounter in institutions or practices of control. This is the theme of the book *The Order of Things*, in which I attempted to see how, in scientific discourses, the human subject defines itself as a speaking, living, working individual. In my lectures at the College de France, I brought out this problem in its generality.²⁷

There are two particular ways in which Foucault's discussion of the human subject in *The Order of Things* is continuous with his discussion of the role of the subject in later works. Firstly, as Baker observes, the discussion of self-constitution, as found in Foucault's discussion of what we shall broadly refer to as "care of the self" (as found in *The History of Sexuality*, "Technologies of the Self", "The Genealogy of Ethics", *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* and other works), deals with the possibility of a subject being its own object, as was the case with man, as discussed in *The Order of Things*.²⁸ Secondly, as in that work, the self-constituting subject is portrayed as being a function of the demands of a certain idea of truth, that is, as fitting into a "truth game."²⁹ If Foucault has appropriated aspects of the human subject, he nonetheless rejects its original form no less vehemently in his last work, "Life, Experience and Science" than he did in *The Order of Things*.³⁰

The implication of Foucault's establishment of continuity between his discussion of subjectivity in *The Order of Things* and the discussion of subjectivity in his later writings, and especially *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, is worth independent consideration.

²⁷ Foucault, Michel, "The Ethics of a Concern of the Self as a Concern for Freedom", as found in *The Essential Foucault*, Edited by Rabinow and Rose, The New Press, London, 1994, pp. 25.

²⁸ Foucault, Michel, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, edited by Arnold Davidson, Picador Press, New York, 2001, pp. 36-38.

²⁹ "The Ethics of a Concern of the Self as a Concern for Freedom", pp. 25.

³⁰ Foucault, Michel, "Life, Experience and Science", as found in *The Essential Foucault*, Edited by Rabinow and Rose, The New Press, London, 1994, pp. 14-16.

While there is indeed a distinction between the subject as constituent and the subject as constituted at play in *The Order of Things*, the persistence of the “problematic of the subject” in Foucault’s later works should do nothing if not indicate that aspects of the rejected model of phenomenologically conceived human subjectivity are nonetheless preconditions for Foucault’s construction of a more coherent notion of subjectivity; a notion by which the various social phenomena considered by Foucault can be more fully understood and, if necessary, dealt with by means of the political activism for which Foucault was well known during his life. In a word, the concept of man, upon dying, helped give rise to Foucault’s notion of the subject as subjectified; a notion that borrows the concept of man’s unification of subject and object and places it in the more coherent context of Foucault’s discussion of power/knowledge.

Having considered Foucault’s discussion of the subject and the death of man, we can come to several conclusions. Firstly, Foucault regarded man as a particular instance of the constituted subject. Secondly, Foucault recognized that the concept of man entailed regarding man as the bestower of meaning, a replacement for God, the locus of all subjectivity.³¹ With the death of man, however, this concept passes out of existence, to survive only in Foucault’s archeological consideration of it, and comparison of those aspects of it that endure in Foucault’s newer notion of the subject and the means by which it is subjectified. In this is manifest an important element of Foucault’s discussion of discourse. To wit, the death of man leads to a conceptual reorganization by which new possibilities arise with respect to what can be said. Just as the death of God gave rise to the concept of man, so too does the death of man give rise to the condition of the possibility of Foucault’s own project; a fact of which Foucault, qua archeologist, is well aware.

Thus, the conflation of the subject and man is at once accurate and misleading. Man refers to a type of constituted subject that held itself to be the locus of all subjectivity. To say that the death of man heralds (or is identical with) the deal of the subject writ large,

³¹ OT, pp. 382-383.

however, is only coherent within the conceptual framework of humanism itself. While a humanist would surely view the death of man as the end of the subject writ large, Foucault in pointing out the death of this conceptual framework, cannot be reasonably said to hold its views as his own. However, man is still an example of subjectification, and indeed, one of a type that is of great interest to Foucault and of great importance to his project. Man's exemplification of the possibility of the unity of subject and object clearly comes into play in Foucault's discussion of self-constitution in his later works.

We are forced to ask whether Foucault's prediction of the death of man constitutes a sort of departure from the subject. Surely, it does not, in the sense employed by the commentators we have discussed. It seems possible, however, that one could assert that the death of man is nonetheless a departure from a certain idea of the subject, which is then later reclaimed, in an indirect way, by virtue of Foucault's references to it in his later works. This argument, however, seems unconvincing. If the perspective at issue consists in holding that Foucault abandoned the subject and then returned to it, it would seem that the above account of the death of man does not constitute such a departure and return. When Foucault proclaims the death of man early in his career, one does not get the sense that he is "abandoning" the idea of man so much as making observations with respect to the nature of that idea and speculating as to its coming downfall. If the aforementioned cannot be said to constitute a departure per se, still less can his later writings be said to constitute a return, as Foucault's later works (including those to which he compares his discussion in *The Order of Things*) deal with subjectification; a phenomenon of which man is an example, but with which man cannot be said to be identical. Perhaps more striking still is the fact that Foucault's veritable last word on the topic is a condemnation of the phenomenological concept of man.³²

³² "Life, Experience and Science", pp. 14-16.

As far as the subject-as-subjectified goes, it seems most appropriate to say that Foucault never abandoned the notion.³³ Indeed, as we have observed, it is present in *The Order of Things* and in fact gains much of its conceptual strength by virtue of acting as a replacement of the outmoded concept of the subject-as-constituent as exemplified by the concept of man. As a result, we find no more reason to acknowledge Foucault's supposed departure from and return to the subject with respect to subjectification than we do with respect to the subject as applied to the self-image of the humanistic "man."³⁴

In conclusion, it seems apparent that much of the literature on Foucault's discussion of the subject suffers from serious misapprehensions. Foucault does not conflate the subject as constituent with the concept of man. Furthermore, Foucault at no time departs from the concept of the subject to which he adheres (namely, the subject as constituted) and likewise does not adhere to the concept of the subject held by the humanists he criticizes, in spite of the implicit suggestions to the contrary made by those who conflate man and the subject writ large. We have likewise discovered implicit and, at times explicit in Foucault's thought, a distinction between different uses of the term subject. When ignored, this distinction can lead to confusion, in the form of the notion that man and the subject are the same and that there is, as a result, a departure and return to the subject within Foucault's thought. While Foucault's discussion of the subject is admittedly confusing as a result of his varied use of the term, and is rendered all the more for those who read his works in translation, it is nonetheless apparent, upon careful inquiry, that Foucault's account of the subject is very different from what certain commentators have made of it, and that the sooner a more nuanced critical study of Foucault's more recently

³³ It is important to note, however, that Foucault *does* reappropriate, in his later work, philosophical themes of interest to humanists (most notably Hellenistic and Christian treatments of self-construction/self-disclosure). The appropriation of these themes is, unquestionably, a characteristic of Foucault's later work and can thus be characterized, not as a return to humanism, but rather as a reappropriation of elements important to it.

³⁴ OT, pp. 382-383.

published writings becomes available, the sooner these misapprehensions can be corrected and the intellectual paralysis they cause removed.³⁵

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³⁵ As a concluding note, we must likewise acknowledge that, while the scope of this paper is limited to Foucault studies, the issues we have dealt with here are not limited to Foucault's work. On the contrary, perhaps as a result of the influence of Foucault's thought as both inspiration and foil to both his contemporaries and to later generations of thinkers, we find similar confusion in works related to a number of other thinkers. This confusion, no less than the confusion abroad in Foucault studies, was and surely continues to be productive of the disenchantment of the political left with a sort of intellectual activity that they broadly and mistakenly characterize as anti-humanist in focus and, consequently, as politically useless at best and dangerous at worst. If, therefore, this social and intellectual paralysis is to be resolved, it must be along the lines of a similar inquiry to the one we have engaged in here: that is, through the revelation of the nuanced treatments of man and the subject at play in much of contemporary continental thought and the consequent recognition of the political utility even of avowedly "post-humanist" systems of thought.

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