

ARTICLE

Habermas, Foucault and Nietzsche: A Double Misunderstanding

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“Do you mean to say that my fundamental Nietzscheanism might be at the origin of different misunderstandings?”¹

1. Introduction

It was Jürgen Habermas himself who conceded at the funeral address for Michel Foucault that he had met the French philosopher only once: “...and perhaps I did not understand him well.”² In the social sciences there is hardly any disagreement that the Habermas-Foucault debate – if there ever was one – has in fact to be considered a case of severe miscommunication. This failure to engage in dialogue appears to be even more puzzling, since Habermas and Foucault, as well as many of their respective followers, share at least an interest in the same matters and often even arrive at almost indistinguishable political conclusions. Certainly, the two philosophers differ greatly in their accounts of reason, power and language, which goes a long way in explaining lasting disagreements between the respective positions. However, what commentators have often found more troubling than these substantial controversies are the serious *misunderstandings* between the two thinkers, starting with Habermas’s extensive treatment and critique of Foucault in the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*.³ While Foucault has been thoroughly defended against the Habermasian accusations in the aftermath of the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*,⁴ these defences have mostly focused on

1 Foucault, Michel. “Final Interview,” *Raritan* 5 (1985): 5.

2 Jürgen Habermas, “Taking Aim at the Heart of the Present,” in *Critique and Power. Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*, ed. Michael Kelly (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 103.

3 Samantha Ashenden & David Owen, “Introduction: Foucault and the Politics of Critique,” in *Foucault contra Habermas. Recasting the Dialogue between Genealogy and Critical Theory*, eds. Samantha Ashenden & David Owen (London: Sage, 1999), 1.

4 Bo Isenberg, “Die kritischen Bemerkungen von Jürgen Habermas zu Michel Foucault,” *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 39: 1386-1399; James Tully, “To Think and to Act Differently: Foucault’s Four Reciprocal Objections to Habermas’ Theory,”

refuting the immediate objections raised by Habermas without trying to link these points of criticism to his general and possibly faulty portrayal of Foucault. However, it is this problematic portrayal, as I will argue, which constitutes the heart of the miscommunication between the two thinkers and the rectification of which is required for a more productive dialogue. According to the thesis put forward here, Habermas fundamentally misunderstands Foucault's genealogical approach in projecting the methodological maxims of the latter's earlier *archaeological* approach onto his *genealogical* writing of history. Hence, Habermas misses the unique character of Foucault's hybrid approach that blends science and literature. The reason for this misreading, as I will suggest, is Habermas's misunderstanding of Foucault's reading of Nietzsche, which is ultimately rooted in Habermas's own interpretation of Nietzschean philosophy and the concept of genealogy in particular.

The merits that lie in redeeming this claim are twofold: not only does it become clear that the fierceness of Habermas's attacks is largely fuelled by this misunderstanding of the general approach, but a clarification of these matters will also facilitate a more productive, albeit still controversial, debate between the two paradigms of critique⁵ in which they actually argue with one another. To be more precise, I will argue that Habermas takes the genealogist Foucault to be engaged in developing a 'super-science' that aspires to reach true objectivity, whereas Foucault himself sees genealogy as an approach that makes massive use of rhetorical strategies, provides a 'fictional' re-writing of history and thus by no means aspires to reach objectivity but, on the contrary, only raises very modest truth-claims of a peculiar character. To the extent that Habermas's objections rest on the failure of genealogy to reach the aim of scientific objectivity, these objections lose their persuasiveness if it can be shown that this is not the aim of genealogy. The real issue between the two

in *Foucault contra Habermas*, eds. Samantha Ashenden & David Owen (London: Sage, 1999), 90-142.

5 Recently, the term 'critique' has often been used with exclusive reference to Habermas's approach in contrast to 'genealogy' denoting Foucault's approach. Cf. David Owen, "Orientation and Enlightenment," in *Foucault contra Habermas*, eds. Ashenden & Owen (London: Sage, 1999), 21-44. Following Judith Butler I will use the term 'critique' in a non-specific sense that can refer to both Habermas's approach and what Foucault sometimes calls 'critical practice', 'critical attitude' or simply 'critique'. Cf. Judith Butler, "What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue," [online 2001]. Available from the World Wide Web at <<http://www.law.berkeley.edu/cenpro/kadish/what%20is%20critique%20%20Butler.pdf>> and Michel Foucault, "What is Critique," in *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, ed. James Schmidt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 382-398. I assume that there are different 'grammars' of critique, but the term 'critique' itself should remain employable with regard to both Habermas and Foucault as well as others.

approaches then is the question, what role rhetoric can play for a critical approach. I will argue that Habermas's own attempt to discard approaches that make heavy use of rhetoric as illegitimate ultimately fails. Thus, the debate between the two paradigms could shift to discussing the relative merits and shortcomings of a particular 'grammar' of critique. Furthermore, this might clear the way for debates about the potential of productive articulations, e.g., between Foucault's micro-analysis of disciplinary institutions and Habermas's macro-diagnosis of a colonisation of the life-world, or Foucault's strategic analysis of the state on the basis of governmentality and Habermas's deliberative democracy. The Habermas-Foucault debate has been restricted for far too long to misunderstandings and polemics about meta-critical issues. It is time to move on to the next stage in this debate, a stage more concerned with substantive issues and less with defending some dogma of how to practice criticism. Accepting a pluralism of different grammars of critique and articulating their relative merits in a creative and productive way might be a more promising option. This paper hopes to contribute to such a shift.

The argument is structured as follows. First, I will provide an account of Habermas's reading of both Nietzsche and Foucault, showing how he links the two thinkers and thereby arrives at his conclusion regarding the Foucaultian approach. This section will be followed by a different interpretation of Foucault's genealogical project that portrays the latter as roughly a combination of science and literature. Based on this it will be possible to show that it is Habermas's reading of Nietzsche which underlies his impoverished interpretation of Foucault, erasing all the literary/rhetorical elements. Finally, I will try to reconstruct a Habermasian position vis-à-vis the genealogical approach *including* the literary/rhetorical elements.⁶ These claims will make use of Habermas's writings on Jacques Derrida, whose paradigm is treated as strongly rhetorical in the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. It will become clear that even though Habermas at first seems to be opposed to the use of rhetoric in general, it turns out that his account accepts it as a necessary device, *not only in literature but also in philosophy*. Thus, Foucault's genealogy may be defended as a philosophical approach on Habermas's own terms.

Finally, a general caveat regarding the terminological difficulties of this paper ought to be mentioned at the outset. As this introductory section shows, many of the arguments under scrutiny revolve around the (potential) distinction among the spheres of science, philosophy and literature, and, particularly, the use of rhetorical elements in each of them. Hence, the

6 Readers who are less interested in an explanatory account of the misunderstanding between Habermas and Foucault and would like to find out more about the significance of the issue of rhetoric for the relation between the two approaches may find it convenient to skip to this section right away.

respective definitions gain critical importance. Since my aim is to question Habermas's understanding of Nietzsche and Foucault immanently, I employ his terminology throughout the paper – not least to point out its limitations and inconsistencies. Unfortunately, in my view, Habermas himself is not *entirely* consistent in his usage of the terms with regard to Nietzsche and Foucault. At the least there is a slight shift in emphasis. I will try to remedy this potential source of confusion by inserting some explanatory notes regarding these key terms where necessary. For Habermas's most elaborate and systematic treatment of the various definitions and distinctions I refer the reader to the "Excursus on the Levelling of the Genre Distinctions between Philosophy and Literature" in the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, as well as to section 4 of this paper where a respective summary can be found.

2. Habermas on Nietzsche and Foucault

2.1 Habermas's Reading of Nietzsche

Habermas's judgment of the philosophy of Nietzsche has remained quite consistent over the years. Nevertheless, his views have changed considerably regarding the significance of Nietzsche. His first critical engagement with the latter's philosophy dates back to 1968. In this essay Habermas still feels comfortable enough to write that "Nietzsche holds nothing infectious anymore."⁷ What is still of some, if only narrow, scholarly interest in Nietzsche, according to Habermas, is the rudimentary pragmatist theory of knowledge that can be found in Nietzsche's writings starting with the second of his *Untimely Meditations, On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, and becoming even more prominent in the later writings. In Habermas's view, Nietzsche's proto-pragmatism conceptualises knowledge and the theory of knowledge as inextricably linked to human interests. Man confronts and imposes upon nature useful illusions to gain mastery over it or at least to lessen the existential insecurity he has to endure. Categories of epistemology and ontology, like substance and causality, are not true in the sense that they correspond to anything in reality: they are rather survival strategies employed by mankind that are deeply engraved in and reinforced by the structure of human language as well.⁸ Nietzsche's initial aim is a critique of such

7 Jürgen Habermas, "Nachwort," in *Friedrich Nietzsche. Erkenntnistheoretische Schriften*, ed. H. Holz (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1968), 237 [my translation].

8 The sentence structure of Subject-Predicate-Object is supposed to give rise to and continually reinforce the 'illusion' of identity and the mistaken distinction of action and subject, for example. Cf. R.J. Hollingdale, "Theories and Innovations in Nietzsche: Logic, Theory of Knowledge and Metaphysics," in *Nietzsche: A Critical Reader*, ed. Peter R. Sedgwick (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 111-122.

metaphysics, a critique that exposes human reason in its contingency and, moreover, reveals the will to power that always lurks behind it. Nietzsche, says Habermas, concludes that truth in the classical sense of the term is an obsolete category because the “truth” of an idea rests on its usefulness and not its correspondence to reality: “we can only give interpretations the validity of which relies on value-judgments related to a certain ‘perspective’ and therefore remains fundamentally relative.”⁹ As a consequence, cognitive (true/false) and normative (right/wrong) judgments are assimilated to aesthetic preferences that are related to a perspectivism of values. Nietzsche’s world thus turns out to be one of perpetual masquerade, deception and illusion for which the attitude of an artist appears to be more appropriate than the traditional theory of knowledge. Behind the veil of appearances there is no longer an essence to be discovered (which would be a motif of conventional metaphysics), and, strictly speaking, the semantics of “veil”, “illusion” and so on therefore cease to have any meaning, dealing yet another blow to metaphysics.

What Habermas finds intriguing in this pragmatist theory of knowledge is mostly the affinity to his own thoughts on the conceptual link between knowledge and human interests as they are found in his book of the same title.¹⁰ Here Habermas tries to argue against the positivist self-understanding of the social and natural sciences in favour of “quasi-transcendental” human interests that inform the formation of scientific knowledge and thereby negate the ideal of strict objectivity. While both philosophers agree in their critique of the positivist sciences that deny the link between knowledge and interests, Habermas treats the “illusions” of mankind as “elements of a conception of possible control over nature specific to the species that has been formed in a collective formation process of the latter.”¹¹ He stresses the point that there is a difference between the useful illusion of causality, for example, that enables successful interventions into nature and other rather dreamlike illusions, the implementation of which necessarily fails in the face of the materiality of nature. Nietzsche’s refusal to distinguish between these two senses of illusion and his assimilation of the first one to “deception” constitutes Habermas’s main point of criticism. The latter instead opts for a critical reflection of mankind’s useful illusions and the “quasi-transcendental” interests that guide them.

While Habermas uses Nietzsche as hardly more than a negative foil in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, his evaluation of Nietzsche’s significance changes dramatically in the following twenty years. In the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Nietzsche’s philosophy signifies nothing less than the

9 Habermas, “Nachwort”, 256 [my translation].

10 Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971).

11 Habermas, “Nachwort”, 525 [my translation].

entry point to postmodernity. Habermas famously portrays the different branches of postmodernism as modified continuations of different elements in Nietzsche's philosophy.

According to Habermas, the radical character of Nietzsche's philosophy now lies in its attempt to leave behind the discourse of modernity that has been evolving around varying self-critiques of reason and instead opt for myth, which, in its illusory character, is linked to the realm of the aesthetic.¹² As in his analysis of 1968, Habermas sees a Nietzschean fixation on the aesthetic aspect of reason. The respective consequences appear to be more severe to Habermas now as he perceives the aesthetic to have been assimilated to the irrational myth and to hold no connection to reason anymore. For Habermas the quintessence of Nietzsche's philosophy is still contained in the view of the world as one of illusion and deception. In it theoretical and practical validity-claims have been reduced to power-laden evaluations that are as relative as artistic preferences and the only rationality of which lies in an attempted augmentation of power. This most extreme assault of reason yet that unmasks its underlying will to power and confronts reason with a new artistic mythology supposedly provides the blueprint for the postmodernist critiques of reason that Habermas attributes to Derrida and Foucault with Heidegger and Bataille as respective intermediaries.

Crucial to Habermas's reading of the "postmodernists" is his portrayal of what he perceives to be the dilemma of Nietzsche's critique of reason: the self-referentiality of a critique of reason that itself has to make use of reason as a resource. Habermas identifies two strategies between which Nietzsche is said to oscillate. On the one hand, there is the attempt of a *scientifically-oriented* critique of reason that should take on the form of an "artistic contemplation of the world".¹³ This critique of reason would employ psychological and historical methods to unmask the power behind it. This strategy supposedly becomes a template for Bataille's analysis of the sacred and Foucault's genealogical writing of history. On the other hand there is the *philosophical* critique of metaphysics that claims the knowledge of the initiate to go beyond philosophy itself. This strategy supposedly animates Heidegger's ontological critique of metaphysics and Derrida's deconstructive project.

As will be shown, it is this clear-cut distinction between two strategies and two respective "paths" into postmodernity that lies at the bottom of Habermas's mistaken or at least impoverished account of Foucault.

12 Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity. Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 107.

13 Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse*, 96.

2.2 Habermas's Reading of Foucault

Habermas's treatment of Foucault in the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* is extensive. Two entire chapters are devoted to the analysis, more than in the case of any other author discussed in the book. As mentioned before, the criticisms of Foucault that the chapters contain have been put under scrutiny on numerous occasions and therefore I shall focus on Habermas's general interpretation of Foucault's approach. It is not the criticisms but the general interpretation that ultimately stands in the way of a fruitful debate between the two positions.

Habermas's reading of Foucault deals with a fairly wide selection of his works, ranging from *Madness and Civilization* to *The Order of Things*, the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, *The Order of Discourse*, *Discipline and Punish* and, finally, the *History of Sexuality Vol. 1*.¹⁴ What deserves mentioning first is that a large part of the chapters devoted to Foucault displays an admirable explicative and analytical sophistication on Habermas's part. The account he presents is a highly synthesized one that forms a fairly coherent whole out of what many commentators have often perceived as a Kafkaesque labyrinth of thought. Yet, for all the empathy Habermas shows in his analysis of single works, his final characterisation of Foucault's approach does not do justice to its complexities and subtleties.

Before we can begin an inquiry into the reasons for this misrepresentation, a short synopsis of Habermas's interpretation of Foucault is required. As far as the early works are concerned, Habermas proves to be an insightful reader who is aware of the intricacies and specific idiosyncrasies of an author. Foucault's archaeology is depicted as a proto-structuralist attempt to write a history of the human sciences that doubts the progressivism of Enlightenment thought and points out the random emergence of certain knowledge structures (the *episteme*, as Foucault calls them). These neither adhere to a Popperian logic of science nor even to the much weaker progressivism of a Kuhnian approach. Habermas accurately depicts how Foucault criticizes the current human sciences because of their paradoxical "humanistic" epistemic basis¹⁵ and the way in which Foucault

14 Volumes II and III of the *History of Sexuality* were published right before the publication of the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* and therefore could not be included. Habermas supposedly has read those volumes (as he has stated in an interview with the author) but has never written on them.

15 What is meant by this, is the framework of the Philosophy of the Subject which, according to Foucault, is the foundation of all the modern human sciences. This *episteme* is criticized in the final chapter of *The Order of Things* because of its conceptualisation of man as an empirical-transcendental double that is supposed to lead to three insurmountable paradoxes that keep resurfacing in the human sciences and can only be overcome in a structuralist paradigm – if at all.

flirts with the idea of structuralist anti-sciences. These should possibly take the place of the traditional human sciences, which, according to Foucault, do not even deserve to be called sciences in the strict sense of the term. The starkest contrast between these and their structuralist version lies in the professed anti-hermeneutical approach of the latter; their detached gaze aims to dissolve meaning into the anonymous play of discourses, thus trying to circumvent the paradoxes that haunt the traditional human sciences and account for their shaky foundation.

Habermas then goes on to discuss the problems and inconsistencies of such an archaeology, most of which have been voiced before and some of which even Foucault himself has acknowledged as valid.¹⁶ The crucial point in Habermas's discussion is his view of Foucault's introduction of a new historical research design for which the latter uses the Nietzschean term "genealogy".

Habermas assumes that this is a response to the shortcomings of the archaeological approach, the aims of which remain unaltered. Foucault's genealogy is to start a modified attempt to break free from the paradoxical humanist framework of the pseudo-sciences and, in Habermas's reading, "aspires to gain true objectivity of knowledge".¹⁷ According to the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Foucault hopes to have found the key to this new "science" in the form of a theory of power. The latter is said to inform the genealogical gaze and explain the (re-)formation of discursive landscapes as manifestations of the ever-changing face of power.

Habermas concludes laconically by pointing out that Foucault's "super science" cannot meet its self-set standards and turns out to be even less scientific than its traditional counterparts in its subjectivism, presentism, relativism and crypto-normativism.¹⁸ If Habermas is correct about Foucault's ambitious aims, one can hardly characterise genealogy as more than a failure – but what if genealogy were supposed to be the opposite of what Habermas thinks?

16 Cf. Jean Piaget, "Structuralism and Philosophy," in *Michel Foucault. Critical Assessments Vol. II*, ed. Barry Smart (London: Routledge, 1994), 404-407 and Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 3-20.

17 Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse*, 323.

18 For a brief summary of these objections see the following chapter.

3. A Different Reading of Foucault's Genealogy

To pin down genealogy as a research design has remained a task burdened with difficulties, as the continuous debate especially among readers sympathetic to Foucault proves.¹⁹ Still, it appears that some traits have been widely agreed on:²⁰ genealogy is a historical method that emphasizes the writing of history, which is strongly opposed to a search for authentic origins (Ursprünge) and undistorted essences. These categories are perceived as belonging to a metaphysical framework that imposes an order upon history that does not exist. On the contrary, the genealogical historian tries to depict her object as a complex interplay of factors and “will cultivate the details and accidents that accompany every beginning”.²¹ Genealogical history, as a consequence, is characterised by a discontinuity that denies the possibility of a present that can be understood as the simple culmination of a linear process in the past. This leads to a de-familiarization of both the past and the present, since they are no longer connected by a straight line of events but by a contingent and precarious process that shows that the present is a highly improbable outcome of the past, just as this past turns out to be a highly improbable ante-history of the present. Finally, it is not just the way genealogy envisions history but also its professed goal to show that certain phenomena *exist within history* in the first place that accounts for it as a specific approach. Just as Nietzsche tried to write a natural history of something that was not even supposed to have a history at all (morals), Foucault sets out to describe phenomena like the soul and the body among many others as products of history.²² Exposing phenomena in their utter historicity underlines the strongly anti-metaphysical thrust of genealogy that tries to undermine the “certainty of the absolutes”²³ in a manner that is “potentially liberating”:²⁴ if things have been different before and their present form is an improbable outcome of the past then these things can be

19 Cf. Owen, “Orientation and Enlightenment”.

20 Cf. Michael Donnelly, “Foucault’s Genealogy and the Human Sciences,” in *Foucault. Critical Assessments Vol. II*, ed. Barry Smart (London: Routledge, 1994), 329-343; David Hoy, “Nietzsche, Hume, and the Genealogical Method,” in *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality*, ed. Richard Schacht (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 251-268; John Rajchman, “The Story of Foucault’s History,” in *Foucault. Critical Assessments Vol. II*, ed. Barry Smart (London: Routledge, 1994), 363-388.

21 Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 144.

22 Cf. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

23 Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”, 153.

24 Rajchman, “The Story of Foucault’s History”, 394.

different, which opens up a “space of concrete freedom, that is of possible transformation”.²⁵

However, by ascribing a potentially liberating effect to genealogy, one has already ventured slightly beyond its rather uncontroversial tenets since the real debate revolves around two interconnected questions: is genealogy a critical approach, and if so, how does this kind of critique or critical practice operate? In other words, what is the ‘grammar’ of this critique? For Habermas’s objections to genealogy the alleged strictly scientific ambitions of the latter acquire utmost importance. Admittedly, Foucault speaks of his approach as “patiently documentary” and goes on to argue that if history is “the endlessly repeated play of dominations” and “the development of humanity is a series of interpretations”, then “the role of genealogy is to record its history”.²⁶ This reminds one of the self-understanding of the archaeological observer who claims neutrality and objectivity for her gaze that aims to historicize everything – except for itself.²⁷ A lack of self-referentiality widely considered to be one of the most serious shortcomings of the archaeological method.²⁸

Nevertheless, as I will argue, these scientific sounding remnants of archaeology are more and more supplemented by a strictly genealogical element that is still relatively weak in Foucault’s early essay on *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*, which is a prolegomenon to his genealogical work phase, but virtually rises to dominance at the height of this phase. These two elements can help illuminate not only the methodological standards of Foucault’s new approach but also its critical character.

Corresponding to the *archaeological element* that stresses the detached description of a discontinuous and contingent course of history there is a first

25 Michel Foucault, “Critical Theory / Intellectual History,” in *Critique and Power*, ed. Michael Kelly (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 127.

26 Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”, 139, 152.

27 As a reminder to the almost scientific and strongly positivist ambitions of the proto-structuralist archaeological programme, one may cite Foucault’s self-portrayal as a “happy positivist” who identifies the rules of discourse almost inductively with reference to observable clusters of real statements. Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 125. Moreover, the view of archaeology as an “ethnology of the culture to which we belong. I try to place myself outside of the culture we belong to, [...] in order to find out how it could actually emerge.” Michel Foucault, “Wer sind Sie, Professor Foucault?,” in *Michel Foucault. Schriften, Band 1*, ed. Daniel Defert (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2001), 776 [my translation]. Note also Foucault’s contention that an archaeological discourse analysis would be superior to the established human sciences such as “that set of disciplines which we call history of ideas, history of sciences, history of thought, history of knowledge” because of the shaky epistemological foundation of these would-be-sciences. Michel Foucault, “Politics and the Study of Discourse,” in *The Foucault Effect*, ed. Colin Gordon et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 63.

28 Cf. Hans Herbert Kögler, *Michel Foucault* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1994).

level of critique that has been characterized as a critique of “aspectival captivity”.²⁹ The aim of this level of critique, which is still, if only to a certain extent, compatible with the scientific self-understanding of archaeology, is to show that things can be different. It is to undermine their self-evident character that leaves no room for any plausible alternative and is largely based on verifiable historical sources. This part of the critique simply points out that logically there is no necessity at all to the status quo being the way it is. It tries to argue against an impoverished imagination that is caught in a certain perspective by confronting it with a different one.³⁰

The question of the status of this other perspective brings us to the second level of critique that corresponds to its strictly *genealogical element*. Most importantly, this element takes the notion of self-referentiality seriously. Foucault leaves behind the notion of an outside perspective on the power-laden discursive formations from which to speak the truth about these objects in the classic sense of the word. The genealogist Foucault acknowledges his being immersed in power relations and self-consciously applies his axiom of a circular relation between power and knowledge to his own genealogies. As one commentator has put it:

“Unlike the neutral, disinterested, archaeological historian, the Nietzschean genealogist admits the polemical interests motivating the investigation. [...] no longer claiming to be outside the social practices analysed.”³¹

Thus, genealogy consequently ceases to raise strong truth claims and considers itself to be one among many more or less biased interpretations of (historical) reality. It explicitly subscribes to a radical perspectivism in this sense, which obviously is at odds with conventional truth claims in the natural and even in the social sciences.

Still, while Foucault would never claim a privileged position for his interpretation of the social world on the basis of better arguments, he is not content with the juxtaposition of his perspective to others.³² However, instead

29 David Owen, “Kritik und Gefangenschaft. Genealogie und Kritische Theorie,” in *Michel Foucault. Zwischenbilanz einer Rezeption*, eds. Axel Honneth & Martin Saar (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2003), 140.

30 Owen thinks that this critique of aspectival captivity describes the critical potential in its entirety. As will be shown, this largely ignores the aspect of Foucault’s critique from which it derives its unique and innovative character.

31 David Hoy, “Introduction,” in *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Hoy (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 6. Cf. Michel Foucault, “Questions of Method,” in *After Philosophy. End or Transformation?*, eds. Kenneth Baynes et al. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 103; Michel Foucault, “Body/Power,” in *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings by Michel Foucault*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Prentice Hall, 1999), 62 and Thomas Schäfer, *Reflektierte Vernunft* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1995).

32 Although it has to be mentioned that Foucault’s own comments on his approach sometimes point into this direction when he maintains that his analyses are nothing

of using a discursive framework to argue for the superiority of his account over others, which would not sit well with his professed perspectivism, he uses the non-discursive framework of rhetoric to make his history of the present more appealing and suggestive. This rhetoric, which has to be considered an indispensable aspect of the genealogical approach,³³ has been scrutinized by several commentators. They have mostly stressed Foucault's hyperbolism, his suggestive analogies, his drastic generalisations and other textual micro-strategies such as substitution of nouns by verbs as the core of his rhetorical repertoire.³⁴ What Speech Act Theory would call the perlocutionary effect of these devices is to give the genealogies an air of drama, urgency and an almost apocalyptic undertone. Thus, it becomes clear that Foucault does not just want to present another perspective on social reality; he also tries to persuade (not convince) the readers to adopt a new perspective by painting the status quo in overly disconcerting colours.

The strictly genealogical element of Foucault's approach turns out to bring genealogy close to fictional discourses:³⁵ the genealogist reduces his truth claims to more or less literary interpretations that make heavy use of rhetoric, which is most closely associated with poetic language. In sum, genealogy presents itself as a unique and hybrid blend of scientific and fictional elements, incorporating accounts based on verifiable "facts" and documents as well as the rhetorically-laden arrangement of this material to produce fictional histories of our present.³⁶

The hybrid character of this critical approach that contains heterogeneous elements has perhaps been best captured by Foucault himself:

"As to the problem of fiction, it seems to me to be a very important one; I am well aware that I have never written anything but fictions. I do not mean to say, however, that truth is absent. It seems to me that the possibility exists for fiction to function in truth, for a fictional discourse to induce effects of truth,

more than an offer of strategic knowledge to be used or refused by readers. Cf. Michel Foucault, "Power and Strategies," in *Power/Knowledge*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Prentice Hall, 1999), 145.

33 Martin Saar, "Genealogie und Subjektivität," in *Michel Foucault. Zwischenbilanz einer Rezeption*, eds. Axel Honneth & Martin Saar (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2003), 175.

34 Cf. Hayden White, "The Historiography of Anti-Humanism," in *Michel Foucault. Critical Assessments Vol. III*, ed. Barry Smart (London: Routledge, 1994), 48-76; William E. Connolly, "Taylor, Foucault, and Otherness," *Political Theory* 13 (1985): 365-376; Hoy, "Introduction", 1-26.

35 Cf. Butler, "What is Critique", 15-16.

36 Cf. for this interpretation Butler, "What is Critique"; Schäfer, *Reflektierte Vernunft*; Hoy, "Introduction" and Paul Patton, "Michel Foucault: The Ethics of an Intellectual," in *Michel Foucault Critical Assessments Vol. III*; ed. Barry Smart (London: Routledge, 1994), 162-170.

and for bringing it about that a true discourse engenders or 'manufactures' something that does not as yet exist, that is, 'fictions' it."³⁷

On the basis of this two-dimensional account of genealogy, it is now possible to analyse Habermas's misreading and to inquire into the reasons that might lie behind it.

First of all it should be noted that an interpretation of genealogy as a largely rhetorical framework numbs the sting of Habermas's accusations considerably. Even if one does not question the validity of these objections entirely, their acuity is derived from the inconsistency of Foucault's alleged super-scientific ambitions and the complete failure to reach these standards. If it is Foucault's intention instead to write a fictional history of the present that does not aim to be super- but rather sub-scientific, then Habermas's proof of relativism, subjectivism and to a certain degree presentism and crypto-normativism in Foucault ceases to have an unmasking effect.³⁸ In the end, Foucault himself would concede a certain subjectivism, relativism and presentism as being an integral, though not the only, aspect of his genealogies.

How does Habermas arrive at a reading of Foucault's approach that implicates these ill-aimed criticisms? The problem lies with Habermas's rather static and homogenizing approach to reading Foucault. Some commentators have argued that this is an intentional strategy that imposes the modernist view of the author and the coherent oeuvre on the poststructuralist Foucault in order to show how he fails to live up to the standards that accompany this view.³⁹ Rather than following these speculations about the strategic intentions behind Habermas's "intelligent, calculated and deliberate"⁴⁰ misreading of Foucault, I shall try to explain its one-sidedness by placing it in the context of Habermas's reading of Nietzsche. The misreading of Foucault, I will contend,

37 Michel Foucault, "The History of Sexuality," in *Power/Knowledge*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Prentice Hall, 1999), 193.

38 In short, subjectivism and relativism both refer to Foucault's refusal to identify some kind of cognitive or normative order as a foundation of his writing of history. If at all, the normative order remains implicit and unacknowledged, which is emphasized by the charge of crypto-normativism. Presentism, finally, refers to Foucault's attempt to describe practices from an outside perspective without recourse to hermeneutic procedures, which, according to Habermas, leads to a "historiography that is narcissistically oriented to the standpoint of the historian and instrumentalises the contemplation of the past for the needs of the present." Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse*, 278.

39 Cf. Mitchell Dean, *Critical and Effective Histories* (London: Routledge, 1994); Ingeborg Villinger & Bernhard Dotzler, "Zwei Kapitel für sich. Notizen zu Habermas' Foucault-Kritik," *kultuRRvolution* 11 (1986): 67-69.

40 Daniel Conway, "Pax de deus: Habermas and Foucault in Genealogical Communication," in *Foucault contra Habermas*, eds. Ashenden & Owen (London: Sage, 1999), 75.

is rooted in a debatable decision Habermas makes in reconstructing Nietzsche's philosophy.

As mentioned above, Habermas sees Nietzsche's attempt at a radical critique of reason as confronted with a choice between two strictly separable strategies: either it is the "scientific" strategy that makes use of historical and/or psychological devices and is ultimately informed by a theory of power, or it is the "philosophical" strategy of a fundamental anti-metaphysics that operates on the basis of an esoteric, privileged insight.⁴¹

Before I turn to the impact this conceptual decision has on Habermas's portrayal of Foucault's approach, it is important to note that it is a highly debatable conceptualisation that goes strongly against the grain of more recent research done on Nietzsche's genealogical framework. While commentators widely differ on a wide array of questions surrounding Nietzsche's approach, most of them are adamant about its strongly hybrid character,⁴² a position that I will try to defend here as well. In short, *On the Genealogy of Morals* combines the virtually positivist claims of the natural scientist of morals with the anti-metaphysical subjectivism of the philosopher-artist who has lost all faith in objectivity, science and truth.

On the one hand, one can still find traces of the "positivist" Nietzsche of *Human, All Too Human* in *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Nietzsche himself positions his latest treatise in continuity with his first attempt at writing a history of morality in the former book,⁴³ an attempt that was just as

41 In this context Habermas emphasises the difference between *science* and *philosophy*. As will become clear in the following paragraphs, his depictions suggest that the former tends to be based on a positivist methodology and aspires to provide an objective account of how things 'really' are in contrast to mystifications and superstitions. Philosophy signifies the attempt to call into question the metaphysical frameworks developed by Kant and others that lend epistemological legitimacy to the claims of these sciences. In contrast to this distinction, the ones introduced in the following sections are much more focused on the various functions of (metaphorical) language in these genres – not the least because *literature* gains more importance as another potentially distinct genre. This leads to a *slight* incongruence of the various definitions/distinctions.

42 MacIntyre describes the project as a mixture of "encyclopedia" and "genealogy". Alasdair MacIntyre, "Genealogies and Subversions," in *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality*, ed. Richard Schacht (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 293. Leiter points out the tension between Nietzsche's relativist truth scepticism and his proto-scientific Empiricism and Naturalism. Brian Leiter, "Perspectivism in Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morals," in *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality*, ed. Richard Schacht (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 339. Hoy describes genealogy in the following way: "There are facts, but only insofar as they inhere in interpretations. The interpretation will determine what counts as a fact." Hoy, "Nietzsche", 262.

43 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* [Translated, with and Introduction and Notes by Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen] (Cambridge: Hackett, 1998), 1.

“naturalistic”⁴⁴ in its approach as the one in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, which is another indication of the “scientific” aspect of the project that plots the sobered scientific view of morality as a strictly natural phenomenon against metaphysical and religious interpretations. Note also the numerous references Nietzsche makes to the necessity of writing “the real *history of morality*”, “the morality which has really existed, really been lived”.⁴⁵ This emphasis on “the real” may well be considered to betray the ambitions of the scientific investigator. Moreover, when he writes that he wants to save Paul Rée⁴⁶ from “hypothesizing into the blue”, since the real colour of genealogy is gray, “which is to say that which can be documented, which can really be ascertained, which has really existed, in short, the very long, difficult-to-decipher hieroglyphic writing of the human moral past”,⁴⁷ it sounds almost reminiscent of positivism’s call for a scientific reasoning that ought to be strictly based on observable evidence. Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals* in certain parts breathes the spirit of the – enthusiastically positivist – sciences of his time.⁴⁸ However, we find him going beyond this “scientific” reasoning when he mocks the natural sciences about their “seemingly most objective realm” and asserts that they still stand “under the seduction of language” in their enterprises. Hence, Nietzsche considers it his task to take the analysis beyond the confinements of metaphysics as they are exemplified in language.⁴⁹ How the “scientific” and the “philosophical” strategies that Habermas ascribes to Nietzsche blend in a virtually indistinguishable manner in the approach taken in *Genealogy* is probably best demonstrated by the ambivalent status of language and the study of it in the treatise. On the one hand, Nietzsche uses etymology as a device that provides him with major clues regarding his hypothesis about the origin of ‘good’ and ‘bad’. He obviously finds nothing wrong in making use of etymology as a conventional science of language to approach the problem. On the other hand, as already stated, he blames the natural sciences – and Western post-Socratic thought in general – for falling prey to the metaphysical spells of language, which makes a professedly anti-positivist philosophical inquiry into the matter of morals

44 Maudemarie Clark, introduction to *On the Genealogy of Morality*, by Friedrich Nietzsche, xxii.

45 Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 5-6.

46 Rée published a book called *Der Ursprung der moralischen Empfindungen* in 1877. *The Genealogy of Morals* is partly a critical response to it.

47 Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 6.

48 One might also add that the jargon of *The Genealogy of Morals* seems to be highly influenced by (pseudo-) sciences like Darwinism (although Nietzsche thought that the latter’s survival of the fittest signalled only the arrival of “The Last Man”), Evolutionary Biology in general, but also of theories of race and eugenics. This is not to say that Nietzsche was a spiritual ancestor of Nazism, but that he was influenced by the discourse of his times.

49 Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 12, 25.

necessary. Thus, while working within the limits of language/metaphysics, Nietzsche simultaneously is trying to go beyond them. Still, these are not two separable strategies between which there is a choice, as Habermas suggests. The historical, psychological and etymological aspects of Nietzsche's enterprise would remain helplessly within the gravitational field of metaphysics were it not for the accompanying anti-metaphysical thrust of the analysis that tries to theorize morality without resorting to the concept of the free-willed subject, leaving behind the prejudices that we inherit from our collective use of language. This anti-metaphysics, however, still needs to be informed by conventional "scientific" analyses like the etymological one that is so integral to the theses of *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Science without philosophy remains naïve; philosophy without science remains blind. Since these two elements of the genealogical framework presuppose each other (while at the same time undermining each other to a certain extent), they should rather be viewed as two aspects of one hybrid approach. Otherwise the originality of Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*, which is largely constituted by this very hybridity, gets dissolved into the more conventional Habermasian choice between two partially conflicting approaches that cannot form a whole.

Nietzsche's own version of genealogy has a remarkable resemblance to its Foucaultian counterpart in that it tries to integrate heterogeneous elements. However, the point to stress here is not that Nietzsche's and Foucault's genealogies are identical,⁵⁰ but that they at least share a hybrid character that

50 They differ most importantly in the normative/critical claims they raise and the way these are supported: Foucault's claims are weaker and strongly rhetorically supported, while in Nietzsche's case they are certainly stronger, meaning, they claim superiority over other views, and are supposed to be supported by either the aforementioned theory of power (Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse*) or the structure of the genealogical interrogation from which its "relative validity" is derived. Daniel Conway, "Genealogy and Critical Method," in *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality*, ed. Richard Schacht (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 325. Alternatively the support is supposed to come from a methodologically turned theory of health/sickness (Hoy, "Nietzsche", 266). Recently it has been suggested that Foucault was utterly wrong to ever assume that genealogy was a Nietzsche project at all, since the latter's use of the term just "mocked genealogists and their enterprise". Jacqueline Stevens, "On the Morals of Genealogy," *Political Theory* 31 (2003): 559. According to Stevens, Nietzsche was not postulating a *genealogy* (*On the Genealogy of Morals* is said to be a critique of such a genealogy by Paul Rée) but a *history of origins* (Entstehungsgeschichte) of morals. Although I disagree with this claim, the restriction of space does not permit me to engage in a detailed critique of it, and, moreover, it does not have any immediate impact on the argument presented here. As Stevens herself concedes, "it would be fair to say that much of what Nietzsche calls history, Foucault and his followers call genealogy". Stevens, "On the Morals of Genealogy", 578. Thus, Foucault can still properly be considered a follower of Nietzsche in terms of the substance of their respective writing of history, even if the one was to call history (Geschichte/Historie) what the other calls genealogy.

Habermas's respective accounts miss in both cases, with the first miss partially causing the second one. This brings us to the impacts of such a reading of Nietzsche.

If one distinguishes categorically between two separable Nietzschean strategies and does not treat them as aspects of one hybrid project, then one is almost bound to compartmentalize the Discourse of (Post-) Modernity the way Habermas does it, with one strictly scientific and one purely philosophical passage. It is not difficult to imagine, then, how Habermas arrives at his reading of Foucault. Guided by that conceptual decision, it is all too easy to find textual evidence that supports the notion of Foucault as an epigone of the "scientific" Nietzsche. Foucault's archaeology actually *is* the manifestation of a scientific Nietzscheanism and since the archaeological element is still present even in *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*, Habermas can easily assume that the archaeological goal of a scientific critique of reason remains unaltered and that genealogy is just a supplementation of this project, a supplementation based on a "scientific" analytics of power that has its analogy regarding content and function in what Habermas perceives to be Nietzsche's "scientific" theory of power based on descent that was to enable the genealogist to evaluate and distinguish critically.

In summary, much of Habermas's misunderstanding of Foucault has to be attributed to the way the former conceptualises the work of Nietzsche. Habermas seeks to pin down various distinguishable strategies, though it would have been far more appropriate to approach Nietzsche's philosophy with his own pragmatist theory of knowledge in mind. This theory of knowledge pictures the world as one of constant flux, in which there are no strictly separable entities – which only our grammatical conventions and our will to survive suggest – but only hybrid amalgamations. The failure to do so might be even more surprising considering that, as stated above, Habermas himself came to see this point of view as one of the central Nietzschean tenets in his comments in 1968. Habermas's more recent reading of Nietzsche's genealogy ignores this hybridity, structuring his perception of Foucault's genealogy such that the approach of the latter undergoes an aggravated de-amalgamation, i.e., there is not only the doubling of one into two strategies, as in Nietzsche's case, but the second element of Foucault's hybrid approach virtually vanishes from Habermas's account.

4. Towards a New Dialogue

What I hope to have shown so far is that Habermas's misunderstanding of Foucault does not have to be seen as an intentional misreading. Neither are we dealing with a strategic deformation of the Foucaultian oeuvre, the creation of a "straw-man". Instead, one can argue that this is nothing more than a *bona fide* misunderstanding that can be explained by certain conceptual

decisions in Habermas's Nietzsche-reception. This explanation and the corresponding clarification of the more complex character of Foucault's approach that I have tried to give ultimately aim to clear the way for a fruitful debate between Habermasian and Foucaultian positions.

Still, it appears at first as if this new basis could hardly lead to a productive dialogue, but might rather intensify the conflict. If anything, one would assume, the rhetorical/fictional character of Foucault's approach even widens the gulf between his model of critique and the Habermasian one. After all, the normativity of Habermas's version of critical theory since the *Theory of Communicative Action* is built upon the primacy of the illocutionary over the perlocutionary use of language and the corresponding primacy of the normal or original mode of language over parasitic forms like irony and rhetoric in general.⁵¹ Hence, it could be assumed that Habermas's position regarding such a rhetorical-fictional approach that is alien to his way of thinking is characterised by a complete lack of understanding and/or a condemnation in the name of communicative rationality. In this final section of the article I will try to make the point that neither of these two assumptions is correct – at least not without qualification – and thereby make an attempt to initiate a productive dialogue between the two types of critique, one in which the fundamental legitimacy of a particular grammar of critique is no longer in question, whereas their *relative* merits, strengths and their respective suitability to address various questions is scrutinized to arrive at creative articulations of these grammars or at least a cooperative division of critical labour.

The reconstruction of Habermas's view of a rhetorically understood Foucault can again make use of Habermas's conceptualisation of Nietzsche as a starting point. Here, the scientific and the philosophical are strictly separated, a result of which is that the non-scientific rhetorical Foucault is missing in Habermas's account. However, one can find the latter's perspective on rhetoric by taking a look at the other side of the (post) modern divide: all the fictional aspects lacking in the chapters on Foucault are found in Habermas's analysis of Derrida, especially in the "Excursus on the Levelling of the Genre Distinction between Philosophy and Literature" in the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. This enables us to apply Habermas's criticism of Derrida, *mutatis mutandis*, to Foucault's approach insofar as this is a rhetorical-fictional approach.

Habermas assumes that Derrida's strategy to escape from the self-referentiality of a critique of metaphysics is not to "place himself in a lordly fashion above the objection of pragmatic inconsistency [as Heidegger

51 It hardly deserves mentioning that Habermas's theory in this respect is in accord with most of the Western Philosophical tradition starting with Plato's critique of the sophists. Cf. Schäfer, *Reflektierte Vernunft*, 79.

supposedly does] but render it *objectless*".⁵² This is achieved by a reduction of truth claims that, Habermas contends, is only plausible if Derrida succeeds in erasing the genre distinction between science/philosophy and literature that corresponds to the above-mentioned primacy of logic over rhetoric. This blurring of the lines would enable Derrida to read philosophy like literary works of art that give rise to numerous contradicting interpretations. All of these would be equally valid and thereby frustrate attempts at a pragmatically consistent authoritative reading, leaving rhetoric, not logic, as a usable guide to interpretation.⁵³ Habermas sets out to disprove the possibility of such a levelling of genre distinctions by commenting on the debate between Derrida and Austin/Searle about a potential demarcation line between normal and derivative forms of speech. Obviously, he wishes to defend this distinction, but the argument is transposed onto the fields of different and separable *languages*. According to Habermas, different languages have different communicative functions and therefore correspond to different genres. He suggests, on the one hand, a spectrum with expert languages that are nearly cleansed of all metaphorical and rhetorical elements, and, on the other hand, poetic languages in which rhetoric is the most prominent characteristic. While those cleansed expert languages have as a function to make problems in the world solvable, and therefore are used by the practitioners/experts of sciences, law etc., poetic language has rather the function to playfully create new worlds, or at least cast a radically new light on the existing one. This world-disclosive character makes it the appropriate medium for poetry and literature in general, as well as philosophy to some extent. Located between those two ends of the spectrum there is everyday communicative practice. While this everyday normal language is "ineradicably rhetorical", the "world-disclosive linguistic framework is almost at a standstill" within it, bringing it closer to the expert languages in the sciences and law, etc.⁵⁴

Before we can inquire into the implications of this Habermasian spectrum, we have to address a potential reservation that concerns the possibility of an analogous application of Habermas's criticism of Derrida to the Foucaultian framework. One has to be wary not to overly assimilate the approaches of the two French thinkers who far too often find themselves being labelled together as "the" poststructuralists. Foucault himself has been adamant in pointing out the differences between his methods and the practice

52 Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse*, 188.

53 Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Spurs. Nietzsche's Styles* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

54 Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse*, 209. Note that these distinctions/definitions are much more based on the language used in these genres compared to Habermas's distinction of a 'philosophical' and a 'scientific' strategy in Nietzsche.

of deconstruction.⁵⁵ After all, Foucault's and Derrida's analyses deal with very different objects and it makes a considerable difference whether Derrida claims an undecidability between various interpretations of a Nietzschean text or Foucault maintains that there is an undecidability between various perspectives of history or, more specifically, the history of modern Western societies. Thus, I shall refrain from levelling the "genre distinction" between genealogy and deconstruction, for which their differing object-realm is only the most obvious indicator. Nevertheless, for all the important differences, on the one question that is crucial for the present context there is strong agreement between Foucault and Derrida: whatever their respective objects, both embrace the notion of self-referentiality, and as a result the claims they raise with their analyses are no longer super- but sub-scientific ones located somewhere in between the genres of science and literature. Although Habermas's initial attacks focus on Derrida's treatment of the textual objects of deconstruction and hence cannot be applied to Foucault's framework, ultimately something else is at stake between the two, and therefore Foucault as well: it is the status of Derrida's and Foucault's *own analyses*. In other words, it is the question of whether their use of rhetorical and fictional elements is legitimate or disqualifies their approaches.

Taking a look at Habermas's spectrum as I have reconstructed it so far, one can easily arrive at the conclusion that he forces a choice upon writers like Foucault and Derrida: on one side there is the path of serious approaches modelled after the social and the natural sciences in which language has to perform a problem-solving function and consequently has to be cleansed of almost all rhetorical sediments that would only introduce a counterproductive ambiguity. Whoever refuses to be "pinned down to the discursive obligations of philosophy and science"⁵⁶ can only choose the other side and produce literary works of art in which the world-disclosing or constituting function of language is unleashed and be content with the status of a novelist.⁵⁷ One way of countering the implications of this clear-cut dichotomy between science and literature, which aims at a disqualification of Derrida and Foucault as nothing more than rather talented novelists is to apply the question of rhetoric to Habermas's own textual body.

Such an immanent criticism of Habermas's approach has been carried out by Romand Coles. He assumes that the former cannot plausibly condemn rival frameworks for their rhetorical elements if it can be shown that his own is equally contaminated by such elements. Coles states that Habermas's theory itself "derives its plausibility [...] and is sustained by unproblematized

55 Michel Foucault, "Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 389.

56 Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse*, 189.

57 Habermas mentions the works of Truman Capote as an example. Supposedly they are literary works but make use of historical sources.

metaphors".⁵⁸ As an example he chooses the term 'consensus' and analyses its metaphorical content. According to Coles, in using expressions like 'reaching a consensus', Habermas suggests that a consensus is always already somewhere out there and that there is a somewhat natural character to agreement. Similarly, the use of nouns like 'obligation' and verbs like 'must' suggests that there is a certain inevitability to communicative action and the resulting consensus. In short, the positive connotations that most readers of Habermasian texts usually ascribe to the concept of consensus are derived from the metaphors surrounding it rather than from the discursively redeemable normative content. Finally, Coles attempts to provide conclusive proof for his point by "denaturalising" the term 'consensus'.⁵⁹ Were a consensus not 'reached' but rather 'forged', its normative meaning would already be altered considerably, and even more so if the word 'discipline' were to appear in the context of the term. Spontaneously, one is prompted to respond that this is hardly a valid argument since the combination of discipline and consensus is an easy-to-see-through rhetorical strategy. It tries to discredit the notion of consensus through its affiliation with the term 'discipline' that carries strongly negative connotations with it. However, this is exactly Coles's point: just as his construction makes use of a negative metaphorical image, Habermas makes use of positive and much more subtle metaphors that shed a more agreeable light on the notion of a consensus. Thus, although Habermas never implies that scientific language could be *entirely* void of rhetorical elements, but rather that the latter "are tamed, as it were, and enlisted for special purposes of problem-solving",⁶⁰ Coles's argument shows persuasively that even in Habermas's own theories the status of rhetorical elements cannot be reduced to a mere problem-solving device, since they stabilize the whole normative architecture of these theories.

Still, although Coles's demonstration is sound, the purpose of this section is not to push this immanent criticism of Habermas's approach further but to demonstrate that heavy use of rhetoric cannot be used as a knock-down argument against a particular grammar of critique even on Habermas's own terms. In order to redeem this claim, it is necessary to take another look at Habermas's spectrum of languages and value-spheres that is not complete yet. The title of the "Excursus" in the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* suggests that Habermas aims at a clear separation of *literature* and *philosophy*. However, in the course of the chapter a shift occurs to the effect that the argument is mainly one about the demarcation line between literature and the sciences. What is the status of philosophy then? Habermas has frequently

58 Romand Coles, "Communicative Action and Dialogical Ethics: Habermas and Foucault," *Polity* 25 (1992): 81.

59 Coles, "Communicative Action", 82.

60 Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse*, 209.

commented on the self-understanding of philosophy as a discipline and the main thrust of these remarks has always been to ask for a more modest philosophy standing in close cooperation with the various sciences.⁶¹ It could be inferred that the argument about science vs. literature therefore applies to philosophy as well. Yet, Habermas deals with the role of philosophy explicitly, if only at the very end of the "Excursus". I believe that here lies the key to resolving or at least defusing some of the pending meta-critical controversies between Habermasian and Foucaultian positions.

In these final sections of the "Excursus", philosophy is designated the task of interpreting between isolated expert cultures and their respective expert languages on the one hand and everyday communicative practice in the life-world on the other. In order to understand this function of philosophy as an interpreter more clearly, it is necessary to take a look at Habermas's more recent comments on philosophy and to place them in the larger framework of Habermas's theory of society.

In the *Theory of Communicative Action* there were two critical theses to be found. In the first thesis Habermas identified a problematic colonisation of the life-world. The far less popular second thesis, complementing the colonisation thesis, was the segmentation thesis.⁶² In the tradition of the Kantian-Weberian diagnosis of a differentiation of reason and the respective institutionalised value-spheres of science, morals/law and art, Habermas voiced concerns about these expert cultures being split-off from the life-world. The rationalisation waves that occur within these cultures as they develop are less and less re-translatable into the everyday language of the life-world which, in the absence of such trickle-down effects, threatens to become culturally impoverished. Experts cannot understand each other across different value-spheres, and between these expert cultures as a whole and the life-world communication is no longer possible. This was the content of the segmentation thesis formulated in 1981.

In a speech given the same year, Habermas offered a potential solution to this problem, or at least identified a promising way of overcoming it.⁶³ Philosophy is to take up the challenge of segmentation, which adds a new role to the self-understanding that Habermas recommends for the discipline. As stated above, philosophy's main job was to be a pioneering science that ventures into unexplored fields of knowledge and transforms this amorphous terrain into material to which the methods of the various sciences can be

61 Jürgen Habermas, "Wozu noch Philosophie", Hessischer Rundfunk, January 4th 1971.

62 Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action Vol. II. Life-world and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 330.

63 Cf. Jürgen Habermas, "Philosophy as Stand-In and Interpreter," in *After Philosophy*, eds. Baynes et al. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 296-318.

applied; in other words, philosophy provides a framework of intelligibility.⁶⁴ Now this task of a “stand-in”⁶⁵ is supplemented by the view of philosophy as an interpreter. The discipline should act as a mediator in the broken-down communication between the life-world and expert cultures to counteract the ongoing fragmentation of the life-world. In the “Excursus” Habermas explicates the reasons for his belief that philosophy is best suited for this mediation. Philosophy, he maintains, has the invaluable advantage of being, so to speak, ‘multilingual’. On the one hand it can relate to more or less esoteric and highly specialized expert discourses that take place in the various value-spheres and differentiated disciplines. On the other hand philosophy is able to connect to the everyday communicative practice of the life-world in which “aspects of validity are intermeshed” and that, moreover, is characterised as “ineradicably rhetorical”.⁶⁶ It is philosophy’s position between the two ends of the aforementioned spectrum and its capability of relating to the languages that are spoken at both ends that qualifies it for its interpreting task. Importantly, though, Habermas holds that philosophy “can only resolve this paradox [the mediation between these spheres] by rhetorically expanding and enriching” the special language of the discipline.⁶⁷

Leaving aside all the difficult questions that arise from this role attribution,⁶⁸ the crucial point for the present purpose is that rhetoric plays a legitimate role in philosophy. As a matter of fact, if one accepts Habermas’s account, it *has to be* rhetorical, since this is a necessary precondition for it to be a successful interpreter between the spheres. We will see later that this holds for philosophy’s role as a stand-in as well.

The first conclusion to be drawn from this is that Habermas could argue that Coles’s objection is off target, at least to the extent that Habermas considers his own concepts to be philosophical ones. This is why pushing the immanent criticism does not necessarily deal a fatal blow to Habermas’s framework. Does this also mean that Foucault and Derrida have to be left off the Habermasian hook if their works can be considered philosophical ones? I think that this is the case, because there is only one last Habermasian argument that could potentially delegitimize Foucault’s critique as mere ‘literature’. According to Habermas, “the rhetorical element of language

64 Habermas demands universalist hypotheses that successively become subject to empirical testing from this kind of philosophy that is exemplified by the agendas of Noam Chomsky, Jean Piaget but also Habermas’s own discourse ethical project.

65 Habermas, “Philosophy as Stand-In”, 310.

66 Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse*, 208-9.

67 Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse*, 209.

68 For example, how is the following paradox to be resolved. Should philosophy strive for a differentiation of the intermeshed aspects of validity that characterise the life-world or should it orient itself at this integrated idea of common sense reason in its work as an interpreter. To remain strictly neutral regarding this question hardly seems to be a possible strategy.

occurs in its pure form only in the self-referentiality of the poetic expression”, whereas in the realm of philosophy “the tools of rhetoric are subordinated to the discipline of a *distinct* form of argumentation”.⁶⁹ In other words, he tries to draw a line between rhetoric as an *end* in itself as it occurs in poetry/literature and rhetoric as a *means* employed in arguments that are of an essentially different nature, namely philosophical ones.⁷⁰ But even if one conceded that a hard-and-fast distinction could be drawn in this way – which would be hard to operationalize, I imagine – the case for a ‘philosophical’ use of rhetorical elements, first and foremost metaphorical language, can easily be made for Foucault. Among other things Foucault’s rhetoric and ‘fiction’ are employed to shed a radically new light on our present, to offer an unlikely re-description of the world. This rhetoric questions the accepted metaphors and offers a new way of making social reality intelligible. Making the world intelligible and offering new frameworks of perception – not the least through new metaphors, one might add – is exactly the role of philosophy as a pioneering stand-in that Habermas has emphasized in addition to the interpreting task. Thus, I cannot see how Foucault’s genealogy could be denied legitimacy as a philosophical framework, even on Habermas’s own terms.⁷¹

5. Conclusion

The first task of this article was an analytical one. I tried to find an explanation for Habermas’s impoverished interpretation of Foucault in the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, a misinterpretation that initiated a long-lasting miscommunication between the respective paradigms of critique. While Foucault’s genealogical approach is properly characterised as a hybrid combination of scientific and literary elements that is fact-based but makes heavy use of rhetoric, an approach that is often scientifically rigid in constructing its arguments but at the same time dramatically reduces in a perspectivist manner the truth-claims raised by it, the more literary-oriented side of the project vanishes entirely from Habermas’s view. He ascribes to Foucault the one-sided project of a super-science, thereby incorrectly projecting the aims of Foucault’s archaeological work phase onto the genealogical phase, which is fundamentally different in character. The

69 Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse*, 209.

70 Cf. Jürgen Habermas, “Philosophy and Science as Literature?,” in Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 205-227 for an analogous attempt to distinguish the two genres in an essay on the novelist Italo Calvino who leans towards Derrida’s position.

71 Tellingly, Foucault, who was always reluctant to accept labels attached to him, cautiously embraced the philosophical one, referring to his work as “philosophical fragments put to work in a historical field of problems”. Foucault, “Questions of Method”, 101.

genealogist does not claim to be a detached and objective observer who describes the world as it 'really' is, as the archaeologist at times tried to as a "happy positivist". As shown above, not only has this misreading led to an intensification of the Habermasian criticisms directed at Foucault, but to a large extent it is also responsible for the deeply-rooted mutual lack of understanding for which "controversy" and "debate" sound almost euphemistic because Habermas's criticisms are based on and aimed at a seriously distorted version of Foucault's genealogy – an unfortunate constellation that might be said to apply in the opposite direction as well.

Having identified this Habermasian misreading I have emphasised his interpretation of Nietzsche as involving a conceptual decision that goes a long way in explaining the one-sided account of Foucault. Habermas's splitting of the Nietzschean project into "scientific" and "philosophical" strategies that can be separated from one another – an interpretation that is highly debatable in itself – is also the key to his conceptualisation of the discourse of (post-) modernity in which Bataille and Foucault follow the "scientific" path laid out by Nietzsche, whereas Heidegger and Derrida choose the "philosophical" one. This decision leads Habermas to disregard all those heterogeneous elements in Foucault's approach incongruent with the "scientific" path that would threaten to undermine the clear-cut two-lane conceptualisation of (post-) modernity. This tendency is reinforced by the fact that Foucault's earlier archaeological project neatly falls into place with this conceptualisation and supports Habermas's view of Foucault as an unambiguous follower of the "scientific" Nietzsche.

To show that Habermas misunderstands Foucault and to explain this misunderstanding in the manner described above have been the main analytical tasks of this article. This analysis has served as a precondition for the following reconstruction of the relation between the two frameworks based on these new premises. One of the most important questions raised by the rectification of Habermas's misreading is obviously what a Habermasian position vis-à-vis Foucault's genealogy *including the rhetorical element* would look like. I have tried to answer this question with reference to Habermas's comments on Derrida, which portray this latter approach as a highly rhetorical one. The conclusion from the analysis presented here is that Habermas's attempt to disqualify the rhetorical approaches by proving that there is a clear demarcation line between science, philosophy and literature fails by and large. Thus, according to Habermas's own account, Foucault's genealogical critique, although largely rhetorical in character, would have to be considered a valid philosophical approach. Only, one might add, if Foucault had aimed to make conventionally scientific claims in his genealogies could Habermas's argument do damage to his approach.

For the Habermas-Foucault debate this could have beneficial effects. If the claims of this paper are valid on the whole then Habermasians should no

longer hope to achieve a wholesale disqualification of the Foucaultian approach, based on either the classical objections raised by Habermas and/or the rhetorical character of Foucault's framework. I believe that such a wholesale disqualification of *Habermas's* approach has not even been attempted by Foucaultians.⁷² This means that we are left with two different grammars of critique, each with its own *relative* merits and shortcomings. If this constellation could be agreed on as a common definition of the situation, the next stage in this debate could concern itself not only with spelling out these relative merits – a task that could be carried out by sifting through the less polemical contributions to the first stage of the debate throughout the 1980s and 1990s and building on these accounts – but with creative articulations between these grammars of critique. As noted in the introduction, this could take the form of mediating between the frameworks of deliberative democracy and governmentality, between disciplinary micro-analyses and macro-diagnoses of colonisation or even between the norms of discourse ethics and the ethics of an aesthetics of existence.⁷³ While I do not mean to claim that these attempts of articulation would always yield productive frameworks of critical inquiry, so far the *impossibility* of such an articulation has largely been taken for granted. In the end, even if it were only a few cases in which this combination would prove to be fruitful and provide new critical insights, each one of them that we have failed to work out so far should be seen as one too many – not for the sake of a Habermasian or Foucaultian grammar of critique, but for the sake of critique as a whole.

72 Cf. Owen, "Orientation and Enlightenment" for an account of this peculiar asymmetry and potential explanations.

73 Cf. Thomas Biebricher, *Selbstkritik der Moderne. Foucault und Habermas im Vergleich* (Frankfurt/M.: Campus, 2004) for a more elaborate treatment of potential articulations. Cf. also Simon Thompson, "The Agony and the Ecstasy: Foucault, Habermas and the Problem of Recognition," in *Foucault contra Habermas*, eds. Ashenden & Owen, 195-211 and Harry Kunneman, *Der Wahrheitstrichter. Habermas und die Postmoderne* (Frankfurt/M.: Campus, 1991) for specific examples.