

Sexual Experience: Foucault, Phenomenology, and Feminist Theory

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This paper explicates Foucault's conception of experience and defends it as an important theoretical resource for feminist theory. It analyzes Linda Alcoff's devastating critique of Foucault's account of sexuality and her reasons for advocating phenomenology as a more viable alternative. I agree with her that a philosophically sophisticated understanding of experience must remain central for feminist theory, but I demonstrate that her critique of Foucault is based on a mistaken view of his philosophical position as well as on a problematic understanding of phenomenology.

Linda Alcoff has presented one of the most devastating feminist critiques of Foucault's account of sexuality (Alcoff 2000).¹ The philosophical core of her argument is that Foucault accords to discourse the unique ability to attach meanings and values to our feelings and sensations and that this has disastrous effects on how we understand sexual violence such as rape. Her discussion focuses on the case of a simpleminded farmhand that Foucault introduces in *The History of Sexuality*, volume 1:

One day in 1867, a farm hand from the village of Lapcourt, who was somewhat simple-minded, employed here then there, depending on the season, living hand-to-mouth from a little charity or in exchange for the worst sort of labor, sleeping in barns or stables, was turned to authorities. At the border of the field, he had obtained a few caresses from a little girl, just as he had done before and seen done by the village urchins round him; for, at the edge of the wood . . . they would play the familiar game called "curdled milk." So he was pointed out by the girl's parents to the mayor of the village, reported by the major

to the gendarmes, led by gendarmes to the judge, who indicted him and turned him over first to a doctor, then to two experts who not only wrote their report but also had it published. (Foucault 1978, 31)

Foucault explains the significance of the case by emphasizing the way a previously ordinary sexual incident became the object not only of collective intolerance, but of a juridical action and a medical intervention. The familiar occurrence in the sexual life of the village became an instance of a careful clinical examination and a theoretical elaboration. For him, the case illustrates the historical turning point at which expert discourses on sexuality gained dominance, and sex was brought under their jurisdiction.

Alcoff accuses Foucault of being too quick to judge the incident as too insignificant to merit the medical and legal responses, however. She points out that he clearly lacked sufficient evidence about the meaning of the encounter from the little girl's point of view. By appropriating writings by adult survivors of sexual abuse, as well as her own experiences, she reconstructs a powerful description of what such a sexual encounter would have felt like from a child's point of view.

In encounters similar to the one Foucault described, the child exhibits a need to be held or hugged, to have affection or attention, or perhaps to obtain some basic good like money for food or shelter. The adult complies but on the condition of genital stimulation. This misresponse produces in the child pain and fear mixed with compulsion and intimidation, a duress created by uncertainty and the disparity between soothing words and painful, uncomfortable invasions, by the command to be silent and the assurance that all that is happening is ordinary and based on affection. One is told by a trusted adult to take the thing in one's mouth, to allow groping explorations, to perform distressing enactments that feel humiliating and foreign. While the child gags and whimpers (or even screams and cries), the adult sighs and moans, holding tightly so the child cannot get away. (Alcoff 2000, 54)

Alcoff is undoubtedly right in pointing out that Foucault's quickness to assume the girl's willing participation manifests a male and adult pattern of epistemic arrogance. What I want to question in this paper, however, is her interpretation of the relationship between discourse and sexual experience that the example is supposed to imply. Alcoff ultimately accuses Foucault of ignoring the girl's experience because of his underlying, philosophically flawed view concerning experience and its relationship to discourse.

She claims that because Foucault accords to discourse the unique ability to attach meanings and values to experience he is unable to dissociate dominant discourses and bodily sensations.² This results in his simply ignoring the relevance of any subjective description of experience. Foucault's account of sexuality is detrimental for feminist analyses because experiences such as rape can never be reduced to dominant discourses, nor is their meaning ever as ambiguous as any statement in a language. To sum up her argument schematically, she insists that to adequately theorize sexual violence such as rape, feminist theory must accept two philosophical tenets that Foucault rejects. The first is ontological: we must make an ontological distinction between experience and language. Experience and discourse are imperfectly aligned because experience sometimes exceeds language, and it is at times inarticulate. The second is methodological: we have to have recourse to descriptions of women's personal, embodied experiences, not merely to the various discursive representations of those experiences. She suggests that feminists turn to phenomenology instead of to Foucault because it can meet both of these requirements.

Although I strongly agree with Alcoff that a philosophically sophisticated understanding of experience must be central in feminist theory, my claim is that her critique of Foucault is based on a mistaken view of his philosophical position as well as on a problematic understanding of phenomenology. I contend that Foucault does not hold experience and language to be ontologically coextensive, nor does he ignore the epistemic importance of subjective experience. My motive for defending him here is not to commend pedophilia or to advocate a more liberal or pluralistic sexual ethics. My aim is merely to show that his understanding of experience remains a theoretically fruitful resource for feminist thought despite his sexist treatment of this incident.

My argument proceeds in three stages. In the first section I show that Foucault does not hold experience and language to be ontologically coextensive. In the second section I discuss the epistemic importance of experience in his thought. I conclude by juxtaposing Foucault's account of experience and phenomenology.

FOUCAULT'S CONCEPTION OF EXPERIENCE

Foucault is not generally regarded as a philosopher of experience. On the contrary, his philosophy, and post-structuralist thought as a whole, is usually read as a critical reaction to those philosophical traditions such as existentialism and phenomenology that take lived experience as their starting point. At the same time all of Foucault's studies can be described as historical inquiries into particular modes of experience: from *History of Madness* and the experience of madness in the eighteenth century to the last volumes of *The History of Sexuality* and the experience of sexuality in ancient Greece and the Roman

Empire.³ Foucault explicitly stated in several instances that experience was a central topic of his analyses. To point out only some of them, in the preface to his early book *The Order of Things* he notes that in every culture “there is the pure experience of order” and that “the present study is an attempt to analyze that experience” (Foucault 1994a, xxi). Nearly twenty years later, in the introduction to *The Use of Pleasure* he again characterizes his work as a study of experience. The goal is to understand how the modern individual could experience himself as a subject of sexuality. In order to do this, one had to undertake a genealogical study of “the experience of sexuality” (Foucault 1992, 4).⁴

Commentators who acknowledge this contrast between his criticism of philosophies of experience on the one hand, and his setting experience as the object of his own study on the other, often explain away the apparent contradiction by arguing that his understanding of experience is distinctive. The way its distinctiveness is understood varies, however.⁵

In his late writings Foucault sought to explain and define his conception of experience. In the introduction to *The Use of Pleasure*, he defines experience “as the correlation, in a culture, between fields of knowledge, types of normativity, and forms of subjectivity” (Foucault 1992, 4–5). This objective definition of experience neatly ties together the three axes of his work—regimes of truth (knowledge), relations of power (governmentality), and subjectivation (forms of relations to oneself). Thomas Flynn suggests that this definition enables us to think of Foucault’s conception of experience spatially: the three axes constitute a prism and the space enclosed by these prismatic planes is “experience” (Flynn 2003, 211). According to Flynn, experience is thus desubjectivized: it leaves us with a plurality of correlations that are irreducible and nonsubsumable into a larger whole. Any analysis of experience must proceed along disparate axes that are mutually dependent on, but irreducible to, one another. Experience is inherently heterogeneous because it emerges from the interplay of distinct elements: domains of knowledge (objectivation), practices of power (coercion), and reflexive relations to oneself (subjectivation). As Foucault explains in a late interview, what bothered him about his early work was that he had considered the first two domains without taking into account the third—the domain of the self. The three domains of experience “can only be understood one in relation to the others, not independently” (Foucault 1988, 243). Only after undertaking his late studies on subjectivation had he achieved a sufficiently complex understanding of experience to be able to adequately map and analyze the historically specific connections between forms of experience and domains of knowledge, practices of power and forms of the self.

Beatrice Han argues that the problem with Foucault’s late, axial definition of experience is that there are in fact two different notions of experience embedded in it (Han 2002, 152–58). On the one hand, Foucault claims that experience is an objective, anonymous, and general structure connecting fields

of knowledge, types of normativity, and forms of subjectivity. On the other hand, his late understanding of the subject also presupposes a more traditional understanding of experience as a subjective self-relation. According to Han, these two notions are contradictory: experience cannot be a correlation uniting both objective (knowledge and power) and subjective elements (forms of self-consciousness). She claims that the third axis introduced in Foucault's late work is distinctly different from the other two and refers to a radically different understanding of experience.

I contend that self-reflexivity is not incommensurable with an objective analysis of experience, however.⁶ The tension between the objective and subjective dimensions of experience is only a contradiction in Foucault's thought to the extent that experience itself is paradoxical: it is irreducible to either its objective or subjective dimensions. It is constituted by practices of knowledge and power—as we know from Foucault's influential studies of madness, delinquency, and sexuality—but it also importantly contains a self-reflexive and meaning-constitutive dimension, the modes of self-awareness. Instead of a clearly defined prism, we might think of it as a series of foldings: the subject must fold back on itself to create a private interiority while being in constant contact with its constitutive outside. The external determinants or historical background structures of experience and the internal, private sensations fold into and continuously keep modifying each other.

Foucault elaborates the idea that experience is both constituted as well as constitutive in the "Foucault" entry of *Dictionnaire des philosophes*—a text that is generally acknowledged to have been written pseudonymously by Foucault himself. In marked contrast to phenomenology, he begins the presentation of his thought by singling out nominalism and the appeal to practices as his main philosophical principles:

Michel Foucault's approach is quite different. He first studies practices—ways of doing things—that are more or less regulated, more or less conscious, more or less goal-oriented, through which one can grasp the lineaments both of what was constituted as real for those who were attempting to conceptualize and govern it, and of the way in which those same people constituted themselves as subjects capable of knowing, analyzing, and ultimately modifying the real. (Foucault 1994b, 318).

Practices constitute the real in the sense that both subjects and objects become intelligible only through them as certain kinds of objects and subjects. In other words, the intelligibility of our experience of the world is constituted in historically and culturally specific practices, and the philosophical analysis of ourselves must be a critical study of them.

However, practices must consist ontologically of acting and thinking subjects and the material that they act upon, even if the meanings given to these bodies, actions, and objects are constituted by the rules of the practices. Foucault insists that the methodological primacy of practices does not amount to behaving as if “the subject did not exist or setting it aside in favor of a pure objectivity” (Foucault 1994b, 317). Rather, one has to analyze *a field of experience* in which subjects and objects form and transform. The analyses of practices must have as their correlate an analysis of the corresponding field of experience opened up and made possible by these practices.

The discourses of mental illness, delinquency, or sexuality say what the subject is only within a very particular truth game; but these games do not impose themselves on the subject from the outside in accord with necessary causal or structural determinations. Instead they open up a field of experience in which subject and object alike are constituted only under certain simultaneous conditions, but in which they go on changing in relation to one another, and thus go on modifying this field of experience itself. (317–18)

Methodologically the analysis does not start with the already given subject in order to define “the formal conditions of a relation to object” (315). This would be the phenomenological approach. Foucault explicitly challenged the idea that the conscious subject had ontological primacy in the constitution of experience. But neither does his analysis collapse into naturalism and attempt to determine “the empirical conditions that at a given moment might have permitted the subject in general to become conscious of an object already given in reality” (315). Instead the analysis takes the form of a critical history of thought, “an analysis of the conditions under which certain relations between subject and object are formed and modified” (315). This study of “the historical *a priori* of a possible experience” is Foucault’s attempt to historicize the transcendental conditions of experience and to inquire into its constitution.⁷ The same process through which such objects as madness or sexuality emerge in history also involves a corresponding process of emergence of a subject capable of knowing and experiencing such objects.

Foucault thus holds that experience is always constituted through specific cultural and historical conditions that shape even its purely personal meaning. It can be rendered intelligible and analyzed formally only as already discursively structured by acts of thought. This does not mean that it is ontologically co-extensive with language or dominant discourse, however. Experience must exceed linguistic representation because our embodied habits and sensations are constituted in a web of both discursive and non-discursive practices. Its meaning is furthermore never reducible to dominant discourse because of

its singularity and reciprocity: experience always incorporates modes of self-awareness and critical self-reflexivity. Individual experiences are constituted by games of truth and power, but they in turn affect and modify these practices.

ABNORMAL EXPERIENCES

Foucault's axial definition of experience does not reduce experience to discourse ontologically, but neither does he ignore its epistemic importance. On the contrary, I argue in this section that his important allusions to "experiential truths" are ultimately the reason why his genealogical analyses succeed in functioning as a form of social critique rather than being purely historical descriptions.⁸

Many commentators have argued that the self-reflexive subject central in Foucault's late work signals a dramatic break in his thought. Beatrice Han, for example, has contended that as well as being internally contradictory, Foucault's late understanding of experience also introduces an abrupt change into his project (Han 2002, 153). In *The History of Sexuality*, volume 1 he had no need for self-reflexive experience in order to account for sexuality. She claims that sexuality was understood purely as the correlate of a discursive practice that constituted *scientia sexualis* as well as of the norms established by disciplines.

In contrast to such views I contend that a self-reflexive subject is indispensable for the critical project of *The History of Sexuality*, volume 1. I return to the case of the farmhand, Charles Jouy. Whereas the feminist problem is Foucault's omission of the importance of the little girl's experience, the critical impact of the case nevertheless relies on the epistemic importance of lived experience, namely that of the farmhand. Foucault's objective is not merely to show that the authorities responded to an insignificant event in a way that was odd and exaggerated, as Alcock claims. Rather, he attempts to show us the discrepancy between the farmhand's personal experience of the incident as "ordinary pleasure" and the medical and juridical representations of it as "a degenerate and perverse act." Although Foucault fails to display moral outrage or concern for the little girl, we are clearly asked to be at least somewhat distressed about the experience of the simpleminded and poor farmhand. Foucault tells us that he was subjected to detailed, invasive questioning about his "thoughts, inclinations, habits, sensations and opinions" (Foucault 1978, 31). The experts measured his brain span and studied his facial bone structure for possible signs of degeneracy. In the end, he was acquitted of any crime, but he was nevertheless shut away in a hospital until the end of his life.

For us to be able to read Foucault's project in *The History of Sexuality*, volume 1, as a form of social critique targeting the medicalization of sexuality, we must be made to see that the expert discourses on sexuality were problematic

representations of the lived experiences of pleasure and embodiment. The experiences of the people involved—the hysterics, perverts, and homosexuals—did not seamlessly conform to the dominant discursive representations of their experiences, and this was an important source of their suffering. Foucault's focus on the case of the farmhand is not just a politically neutral, philosophical analysis of discourses and their historical changes; it is meant to demonstrate the need for a philosophical and political rethinking of our conception of sexuality. His analysis succeeds in functioning as a form of social critique only because it assumes that our experiences are dependent on but not reducible to scientific discourses and social norms, and that they could be qualitatively transformed if they were governed by different kinds of discourses and types of normativity. In this instance, the implicit assumption is that the farmhand's as well as our own subjective experience of sexuality would be in some way freer, better, or richer if it was not constructed and hemmed in by medical discourses and practices. The call is for a broader range of possible experiences of sexuality—experiences currently unavailable or even unimaginable—constructed through a new or different set of cultural norms and discursive practices.

I will not go into the question of the normative grounding of Foucault's analyses here—in other words, into the question of what would constitute the criteria for a better or richer experience.⁹ My point here is simply to argue that while the personal, lived, or subjective experience is not ontologically or epistemically foundational or self-sufficient in Foucault's analyses, it is nevertheless indispensable. If Foucault held that subjective experiences were simply coextensive with dominant expert discourses, as Alcoff claims, there would be no need, or possibility, for him to undertake a critique of them.

In an extended discussion of the farmhand's case in the *Abnormal* lectures (2004), Foucault emphasizes the reason he is focusing on it at such length: it signals the appearance of the abnormal individual and of the domain of abnormalities as the privileged object of psychiatry. The case allows us to mark roughly the crucial period as well as the distinct way in which the abnormal individual was psychiatrized. For Foucault, the fact that the farmhand was not charged judicially—he was acquitted of legal responsibility—but that legal psychiatry took responsibility for his case represented a completely new way in which psychiatry functioned. He claims that around 1850–1870 a new psychiatry was born: this psychiatry dispensed with illness, which previously had functioned as the essential justification of mental medicine, and focused instead on behavior with deviations and abnormalities. According to the new psychiatric experts, the farmhand was not suffering from any illness understood as a definite chronological process. The reason they measured his cranium and the proportion between his trunk and limbs was that they needed to identify a permanent physical constellation, a permanent stigma that would brand him structurally. “In the case of Charles Jouy and in this new kind of psychiatry, the

offense is instead integrated within a schema of permanent and stable stigmata” (Foucault 2004, 298). In other words, the psychiatrists were not interested in finding symptoms of an illness, but of identifying a general condition of abnormality.

Foucault’s aim is thus to analyze the distinct way in which Jouy’s actions and behavior were pathologized in the new psychiatric regime. He is not claiming that before the emergence of this new kind of psychiatry either the farmhand’s or the little girl’s experiences were simply natural in any sense. They were discursively and normatively constituted also in the earlier period, but through a significantly different, *moral* discourse: either a religious discourse operating with the notions of sin and salvation, or a legal discourse relying on legal culpability or the absence of it. Whereas the adult experience of pedophilia was effectively medicalized as a structural abnormality in the latter half of nineteenth century, the fact that the little girl, Sophie Adams, was confined to a house of correction for indecent behavior until she came of age suggests that a corresponding psychiatrization of the child’s experience was not yet conceivable.

Foucault’s discussion is clearly biased in favor of the farmhand’s experience—his interest focuses exclusively on the way it was psychiatrized and pathologized in the new discourses of abnormality. As Jana Sawicki aptly observes in her review of the lectures (Sawicki 2005), Jouy is the only victim in Foucault’s story. Foucault does not feel compelled to address Sophie’s fate at all, and this failure to address her case coupled with the suspicion that she was in some sense willing or complicit in the act manifests male arrogance and sexism, as Alcoff claims. However, I want to insist that Alcoff is mistaken in arguing that the reason Foucault overlooks Sophie’s experience is because he has a theoretically flawed or impoverished understanding of experience. Foucault might be wrong in assuming that Sophie’s experience of the incident is coextensive with dominant norms and therefore redundant, but this is not because he assumes that *all* experiences *necessarily* are. In exactly the same way that Foucault’s critique of psychiatry relies on the recognition that dominant discourses and the subjective experiences they constitute are not seamlessly aligned, the Foucauldian feminist critique of patriarchal discourses and attitudes to rape must recognize the correlation, but also the discrepancy, between discourse and experience. A Foucauldian feminist analysis would have to approach Sophie’s experience in a parallel manner by focusing on the correlation as well as the discrepancy between the patriarchal and religious discourses of the time that implied that Sophie was complicit, culpable, and amoral, and what was probably her own lived difficulty in recognizing her complicity.

Foucault was clearly aware of the epistemic indispensability of first-person experience, and this is why he emphasized the importance of *subjugated knowledges*. Subjugated knowledges refer to forms of discourse that have been

disqualified for being below the required level of erudition or scientificity: they are non-conceptual, naïve, and hierarchically inferior. They are typically the knowledge of the patient, the pervert, or the delinquent, and they make possible the local critique of dominant discourses (Foucault 2003, 6–8). He was also aware, however, that descriptions of lived experience cannot be treated as epistemically foundational or self-sufficient. He does not give us an actual, first-person description of the farmhand's experience; we are left to imagine it. The farmhand's suffering remains unspoken while the experts speak and write instead. But even if we did have access to his personal account of the events, it is questionable how articulate such an account would have been. The ontological distinction between experience and discourse affirmed earlier means also that epistemologically a gap opens—and must remain—between lived experiences and their linguistic descriptions. Linguistic description must inevitably struggle to capture even partially the richness of experience.

A further problem concerns the authenticity of self-description. Although she advocates phenomenology and emphasizes the need for feminist theory to include personal descriptions of embodied experience—such as first-person accounts of sexual violence—Alcoff nevertheless acknowledges the problematic status of women's experiences as products of patriarchal society. She notes that women's accounts of our own lives and their meaning cannot be accepted uncritically without relinquishing our ability to challenge gender ideology. The emphasis on personal descriptions of embodied experiences does not mean holding that a rape experience, for example, is unsusceptible to discursive constructions. A rape can be experienced as deserved or undeserved, as shameful for oneself or the perpetrator, as an inevitable feature of the woman's lot or as an eradicable evil (Alcoff 2000, 43). She thus accepts the post-structuralist critique of self-sufficient and epistemically foundational experience and insists on the phenomenological descriptions for strategic reasons: first-person accounts cannot reveal the absolute truth about sexuality, rape, or gender, but they can correct some bias. When the analyses of discourses of rape are supplemented with phenomenological accounts, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of rape and are much less likely to suppose that it is only a discursive effect or interpretation (52). Her claim is thus not that feminist theory should rely solely or even primarily on first-person descriptions of sexual and gendered experiences, but that our analysis of rape should be *supplemented* with “phenomenologies of rape experiences from the perspectives of survivors” (52).

Interestingly, Alcoff's suggestion comes close to the strategy that Foucault adopts when trying to understand the experience of hermaphrodite embodiment. In his criticism of the modern deployment of sexuality he does not give us the first-person description of the farmhand's experience, but he does give us the personal story of another victim of the modern regime of sex: Alexina Barbin. Alexina Barbin was a hermaphrodite who lived at the end of the

nineteenth century, when scientific theories about sex and sexuality were gaining prominence. She was designated as female at birth, but grew up with an ambiguous awareness of her bodily specificity. At the age of twenty-one she decided to confess her anatomical particularity to a priest and a doctor, and as a consequence was scientifically reclassified as a man by medical experts. Obligated to make a legal change of sex after juridical proceedings and a modification of her civil status, she/he attempted to find work and live as a man. She/he was incapable of adapting her/himself to the new identity, however, and committed suicide at the age of thirty. She/he left behind memoirs recounting her/his tragic story, which Foucault discovered in the archives of the Department of Public Hygiene.

The way the book *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite* is compiled is significant (Foucault 1980). Foucault effectively juxtaposes her memoirs and thus the first-person, lived account of the hermaphrodite body with the third-person, medical accounts of it. The memoirs are followed by a dossier that contains the facts related to the story: names, dates, and places; her birth certificate; the two reports written by doctors—one by the doctor reassigning her sex and another report based on the dissection of her corpse—as well as the articles that appeared in the press at the time.

Alexina's memoirs give us the lived, first-person account of her ambiguous embodiment. She describes in guarded terms the painful and humiliating medical examination that ultimately reveals her "true" sex and questions the ability of scientific discourse to ever fully understand her ambiguous embodiment:

[A] few doctors will make a little stir around my corpse; they will shatter all the extinct mechanisms of its impulses, will draw new information from it, will analyze all the mysterious sufferings that were heaped up on a single human being. O princes of science, enlightened chemists, whose names resound throughout the world, analyze then, if that is possible, all the sorrows that have burned, devoured this heart down to its last fibers; all the scalding tears that have drowned it, squeezed it dry in their savage grasp. (Foucault 1980, 103)

While challenging the narrow truth of scientific discourse, Alexina's memoirs can clearly not be simply understood as the "real" or "authentic" account either. They are fundamentally shaped by the narrative conventions as well the cultural conceptions of gender characterizing her time. As Foucault notes, they are written in "that elegant, affected, and allusive style that is somewhat turgid and outdated" and which for women's boarding schools "was not only a way of writing but a manner of living" (xii). He qualifies the conclusions he draws

from the memoirs by talking about “impressions” one has “if one gives credence to Alexina’s story” (xiii).

On the other hand, it is equally clear that the third-person scientific accounts and medical diagnosis of her “true” identity cannot be accepted as the definitive description of her embodiment either. Foucault notes that although Alexina wrote her memoirs once her new identity had been discovered and established, it is obvious that she did not write it from the point of view of a sex that had at last been brought to light. “It is not a man who is speaking, trying to recall his sensations and his life as they were at the time when he was not yet himself” (Foucault 1980, xiii). The tragedy of Alexina’s experience is precisely the result of the fissures and disjunctions on the one hand, and the overlapping and necessary correlation on the other, between the subject’s experience of his or her body and the scientific and legal discourses on *its true sex*.

The form of the book, not just its content, is thus highly significant for Foucault’s attempts to show that while our embodiment is never independent of dominant discourses and practices of power, it is not reducible to them either. Bodies always assume meaning through a complex process in which competing discourses, conceptualizations, and cultural practices intertwine with private sensations, pleasures, and pains.

The same method is also used in Foucault’s discussion of another object of expert discourses, Pierre Rivière, in his book, *I, Pierre Rivière, Having Slaughtered My Mother, Sister, and Brother*. Pierre Rivière’s memoirs of his life are juxtaposed with the documents of psychiatry and criminal justice. Foucault explains that the different discourses compiled in the form of a single book outline a combat and a series of confrontations: the doctors were engaged in a combat among themselves, and also with the judges and the prosecution, over the use of psychiatric concepts in criminal justice; the lawyers had their own combats about the relatively novel use of extenuating circumstances; the villagers and their testimonies were part of a struggle to defuse the terror of the event by ascribing the crime to singular madness. Publishing all the documents together meant that Foucault was able to draw a map of these combats in order to “rediscover the interaction of those discourses as weapons of attack and defense in relations of power and knowledge” (Foucault 1975, xi). Rivière’s own account, however, assumes the central position in this composition as the mechanism that holds the whole together. It provides “the zero benchmark to gauge the distance between the other discourses and the relations among them” (xiii).

Foucault’s genealogical critique of expert discourses and their power over “abnormal subjects” requires as its *raison d’être* the assumption that the first-hand experiences of the subjects themselves do not seamlessly match the scientific theories (fields of knowledge) and the dominant social norms (types of normativity). All experiences are irrevocably constituted by the axis of

power and knowledge, but they also contain a subjective dimension, the modes of relation to oneself. Foucault's genealogies not only assume this dimension, they explicitly problematize its correlation with, as well as its distinctiveness from, the other two axes. In order to function as a form of social critique his analyses must contrast the subjective with the objective and reveal a problematic and irreducible gap: the normative and dominant discourses must be juxtaposed with the subjugated knowledges in order to reveal the former as pathologizing, criminalizing, and moralizing discourses of sexuality, for example.

Foucault was fascinated throughout his life with transformative limit-experiences—experiences that were capable of tearing us away from ourselves and of radically changing the way we think and act.¹⁰ I have attempted to argue here, however, that his understanding of ordinary, everyday experience already contains the potential for transformation and resistance. Our only option of resistance against the normalizing effects of power/knowledge does not lie in waiting for a life-changing event capable of shattering the normalized self, nor do we have to attempt to cross its limits. Our everyday experience already contains fractures: it has aspects and elements that are inconsistent with its normative determinants. The potential for change emerges out of these fractures, from the space of critical self-reflection created by the self folding back upon itself. Foucault explains:

The experience through which we grasp the intelligibility of certain mechanisms (for example imprisonment, punishment, and so on) and the way in which we are enabled to detach ourselves from them by perceiving them differently will be, at best, one and the same thing. This is really the heart of what I do. What consequences or implications does that have? The first is that I don't depend on a continuous and systematic body of background data; the second is that I haven't written a single book that was not inspired, at least in part, by a direct personal experience. I've had a complex personal relationship with madness and with psychiatric institutions. I've had a certain relationship with illness and death. . . . The same is true of prison and sexuality, for different reasons. (Foucault 2000, 244)

The constituted experience and its critical transformation must not be assumed to be two categorically different things.¹¹ Rather, they are both aspects of the historically heterogeneous and self-reflexive nature of experience.

CONCLUSION: FOUCAULT VERSUS PHENOMENOLOGY

The contrast between two different dimensions of experience—objective and subjective—is not resolved by assuming that Foucault studies one and

phenomenology the other.¹² Rather, they both try to relate these two different poles of experience, but they do it in different ways.

Phenomenology holds that experience has a constitutive as well as a constituted dimension, but it is “a philosophy of the subject” in the sense that it subsumes the objective under the subjective. The intersubjective conditions of experience, for example, must and can be disclosed through a description of the subject’s structures of experience. The phenomenological method only begins with first-person descriptions of experience, however. It then crucially attempts to move beyond them, from the empirical to the transcendental level of inquiry. Phenomenological descriptions of embodiment are thus not the same as the personal narratives of rape victims, for example. Nor are they sociological generalizations highlighting the common features of varied and extensive data collected from interviews. The crucial move from the empirical to the transcendental level of description that characterizes phenomenology becomes possible because of a bracketing or an *epoché*.

There exists extensive literature on how this bracketing or *epoché* should be understood. In Husserl’s original formulations it enables the investigator to bracket the validity and manner of being of the world in order to be able to describe and analyze the essence of the constituting consciousness. Some of his followers, such as Eugen Fink and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, doubted the possibility of a complete reduction to transcendental consciousness and described the *epoché* as only slackening the intentional threads that attach us to the world and thus bringing them to our notice.¹³ In the minimal but crucial sense, it is the move that enables the philosopher to take critical distance from his or her experience in order to study its constitutive conditions. Although Alcoff advocates phenomenology for feminist theory, she dismisses the idea of a phenomenological reduction as “too wedded to the goal of establishing certainty” (Alcoff 2000, 48). When she contrasts “phenomenologies of rape experiences from the perspectives of survivors of rape” to “discourses of rape” (52), it is therefore not clear what phenomenological description means to her, and how we should distinguish it from personal narrative. Without some philosophical reflection on the role of phenomenological bracketing, the distinction she makes between “phenomenologies of rape” and “discourses of rape” risks collapsing into a meaningless opposition.

In contrast to phenomenology, Foucault maintains the irreducible correlation between the constituted and the constitutive and resists all foundational recourse to experience. But he does not contest the ontological or even epistemic indispensability of subjective experience. The problem with phenomenology, according to him, is not the attempt to theorize lived experiences. The problem is that experience is treated as foundational and epistemically self-sufficient. He insists that embodied experiences such as Herculine Barbin’s, for example, can only be understood in the cross lighting of two irreducible

perspectives: the subjective memory of the patient and the objective knowledge of the experts.

To conclude, I have attempted to show that experience is irreducible for Foucault's critical project in at least two senses. First, without the ontological assumption of constitutive experience we cannot understand how subjects and objects are formed in social practices. Second, the self-reflexivity of experience importantly opens up the critical perspective on our present that is the driving political motivation of Foucault's thought. I contend that his conception of experience can provide a valuable philosophical tool for feminist theory in its attempt to understand and validate women's experiences.

NOTES

1. See also Alcoff 1996.
2. Alcoff also accuses Foucault of the contrary view, however: Foucault views pleasure as antithetical to power when it is disinvested of dominant discursive meanings. She reiterates the criticism originally advanced by Judith Butler according to which Foucault naively posits pleasure outside of power and discourse. See Butler 1990; Alcoff 2000, 53.
3. See, for example, O'Leary 2009.
4. See also, for example, Foucault 1997, 200–201.
5. On discussions of Foucault's conception of experience, see, for example, Han 2002; Flynn 2003; Oksala 2005; Djaballah 2008; O'Leary 2009.
6. Kant's transcendental deduction, for example, was an attempt to show, through a purely analytic analysis of experience, the reflexivity of all cognition. All experience had to incorporate self-awareness or reflexivity, and cognition involved a special reflexive act of bringing representations to awareness—the apperception of representation.
7. It has been widely debated whether Foucault succeeds in this project or not. See, for example, Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982; Gutting 1989; Han 2002; Oksala 2005.
8. See, for example, Foucault 2000.
9. This question has been extensively discussed by Foucault's critics and commentators. See, for example, Habermas 1987; Fraser 1989.
10. See, for example, Foucault 2000.
11. Timothy O'Leary discusses Foucault's understanding of experience in his recent book *Foucault and Fiction* (2009). Similar to my argument, his aim is to reveal its potential for thinking through the possibilities of change and resistance. He distinguishes two distinct forms of experience in Foucault's thought. He calls the first "everyday" or "background" experience; it characterizes the general, dominant form in which being is given to a historical period as something that can be thought. The second is "transformative" experience; it is a form of experience that is rare and unusual: it is something that is capable of tearing us away from ourselves and changing the way we think and act. O'Leary emphasizes the importance of such transformative

limit-experiences for Foucault because the question of resistance hinges on the question of how it is possible to gain a critical distance from the modes of everyday experience.

12. See, for example, Kruks 2001.
13. See, for example, Merleau-Ponty 1994, xiii.

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