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Patristics after Foucault: Genealogy, History and the Question of Justice

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Abstract

This article responds to David Newheiser's contribution, 'Foucault and the Practice of Patristics', Rick Elgendy's 'Practices of the Self, Reading Across Divides: What Michel Foucault Could Have Said about Gregory of Nyssa' and Devin Singh's 'Disciplining Eusebius: Discursive Power and Representation of the Court Theologian'. It discusses two key distinctions within Foucault's work: that between genealogy and archaeology, and that between genealogy and pedigree, arguing that while patristics is always an analysis and practice of power, it has a complex relationship to the role of history as a source of authority. It discusses the way that Foucault's work highlights the complex relationship between past and present within patristics, which uses the past to change the present yet draws on the present to rewrite the past and, suggests that the question of the relationship between power, oppression and justice points towards the limitations of Foucault's thought as an approach to the study of patristics.

In responding to Newheiser, Elgendy and Singh's articles on Foucault and patristics, I will highlight some of the key themes which have emerged through these and and outline some of the broader questions they point to about the role of Foucault's thought in relation to the practice of patristics, with the goal of opening up some lines of inquiry for future work on the relationship between Foucault and patristics.

David Newheiser's introductory article, 'Foucault and the Practice of Patristics' highlighted the key Foucauldian themes which emerge consistently throughout all three contributions: the way that knowledge emerges and interacts with power, and the way that these discourses shape and are shaped by individuals. This article will discuss Foucault's concept of 'genealogy', which encapsulates some of the key shifts in thinking that Foucault's work demands – as illustrated by the preceding articles – and which highlights some of the questions which are implied but not fully articulated by those others. I want to suggest that there are two key oppositions in play: firstly, the opposition between genealogy and archaeology; and secondly the opposition between genealogy and pedigree.

First, then, genealogy and archaeology, both of which are terms used by Foucault to describe his distinctive approach to history. The two terms represent

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two distinct phases of Foucault's self-understanding. 'The archaeology of knowledge' is the term the early Foucault uses to describe his approach to historiography. But it is an image which has serious limitations, and is evocative of the very historians Foucault critiques: digging away in the dust of the past to unearth the foundations of ancient structures so that the artefacts of long-gone and alien cultures can be more accurately classified and categorised, and gaggles of schoolchildren can wander disinterestedly around ancient ruins. What is missing is the crucial role of power both in the things which are dug up and in the practice of digging itself. The notion of genealogy captures this aspect more effectively. Unlike archaeology, genealogy is always about power: it is always something that implicates us, always about the struggle over which story we will tell to understand who we are and where we came from. Genealogy always traces a line from the past to the present, and in our ancestry we find heroes to emulate, mad aunts to be locked away in attics and, as Singh's paper suggested, 'idiot nephews' to be sent outdoors to play while the grown-ups have serious conversations. Foucault himself made the shift from the language of archaeology to that of genealogy following a mid-career engagement with Nietzsche, claiming that Nietzsche's work had enabled him to consciously articulate the (previously latent) centrality of power to his approach. After this period of working on Nietzsche, Foucault never spoke about archaeology again.[1] This notion of history as genealogy is particularly appropriate for patristics which is, after all, the study of the fathers; and Newheiser, Elgendy and Singh's articles have all amply illustrated that patristics is closer to genealogy than to archaeology. Foucault says that he writes history because he is interested in 'writing the history of the present';[2] Virginia Burrus says of patristics that 'to retell the history of doctrine is to rewrite theology'.[3] This is as much the case for us as it was for Athanasius: patristics is always a study of power in the past and a practice of power in the present.

But genealogy can be placed in opposition to another concept, that of pedigree, and this opposition poses a more serious problem for the practice of patristics in general, and the articles gathered together here in particular. In an essay on Nietzsche, Foucault distinguishes between two different sorts of origins: *Ursprung* and *Herkunft*.[4] The pursuit of *Ursprung* is the 'attempt to capture the exact essence of things … a timeless and essential secret'; the pursuit of *Herkunft* is the work of genealogy, and what it finds that there is no essence, that 'historical beginnings are lowly', that 'what is found at the historical beginning

[1] Alan Sheridan, *Michel Foucault: The Will to Truth* (London, 1980), 116.

[2] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Harmondsworth, 1991), 31.

[3] In *Begotten Not Made: Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford, 2000), 4.

[4] As discussed in Raymond Geuss, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', *European Journal of Philosophy* 16 (1994), 274-92, 277.

of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin [but] their disparity.'[5] Raymond Geuss describes this distinction as the difference between pedigree and genealogy. Pedigree searches for a pure origin from which all value originates, and looks for an unbroken line of inheritance; by contrast, genealogy says that there is no such thing as a pure origin: all we find at the beginning of the history of the things we value are contingency, power struggles, violence and delusions.[6] While all of the articles here have fallen clearly on the side of genealogy as opposed to archaeology, of power as opposed to objectivity or neutrality, they exhibit a more complex relationship to the opposition of genealogy and pedigree which in turn is symptomatic of one of the broader questions that Foucault's work poses for patristics. Newheiser's introduction highlighted the way that the history of the emergence of Nicene orthodoxy was more ambiguous than suggested by Athanasius' straightforward pedigree; yet he acknowledges his own sympathy for Athanasius' formulations. Singh discussed the inextricable connection of politics and theology in the work of Eusebius; yet wanted to keep open the possibility that this connection was something to be valued rather than decried.

I think this is indicative of a broader tension within both patristics and the contemporary critical thought to which Foucault and others give birth. The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek points out that while the Enlightenment set out to establish a notion of truth which was independent of the authority of its speaker, a truth which was objective, verifiable, and universal, the most powerful critiques of the ideological blindness to which this dream gave rise are precisely those which rely on the authority of founding figures: psychoanalysis, Marxism, and the more general field of critical theory to which Foucault belongs. Genealogy and pedigree paradoxically coincide in a set of approaches which is at its most fruitful when it is most dogmatically faithful to its founding texts.[7] I would suggest, then, that this tension between pedigree and genealogy, between authority and critique, is perhaps particularly characteristic of the post-Enlightenment world of thought within which both we and Foucault belong. Yet I also want to suggest more broadly that the same tension is constitutive of Christian theology itself. The Christian narrative begins with the garden of Eden, a pure origin from which we are expelled; and yet the way back to Eden is barred by an angel with a flaming sword. After Eden comes a clear line of descent: Adam and Eve, who disobeyed God; Abraham, who didn't trust God's promises and twice offered his wife to other men; Isaac, who was fooled by his wife and son; Jacob, who tricked his brother out of his inheritance; King David, who committed adultery and murder; King Solomon, who worshipped

[5] Cited in *ibid.* 279.
[6] *Ibid.* 277.
[7] Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and out* (New York and London, 2008), 116-20.

false gods; St Peter, who betrayed Jesus; and so on and so on. Given such a mixed lineage, it is perhaps surprising that issues such as Eusebius' proximity to Constantine should continue to prove so vexing. And yet the wager of Christian theology, of patristics, is that faithfulness to this lineage is more productive than mere critique, that it continues in some sense to carry authority for us.

This tension between pedigree and genealogy also plays into wider questions of the relationship between past and present, between patristics and the rest of theology, and between patristics and contemporary philosophy. Again, this theme is one which resurfaces throughout Newheiser, Elgendy and Singh's discussions. Singh mentioned Lewis Ayres' argument that patristic theology makes ad hoc use of cultural and philosophical tools in the service of biblical reflection; Ayres goes on to contrast this approach with that of modern theology which, he claims, conforms a priori to those cultural and philosophical tools. I think that both the form and the content of the articles here highlight just how problematic that claim is, and suggest a more complex interaction between past and present, patristics and theology, Athens and Jerusalem. All of the articles show how the tools Foucault gives us enable fresh perspectives on the past which bring to light certain things which might otherwise go unnoticed. Newheiser's article went some way towards unpicking the narrative of a univocal tradition of orthodoxy; Elgendy demonstrated the way that Foucault might help to understand Gregory's asceticism as a challenge not only to the individual but to the discipline of patristics; and Singh used Foucault to expose the interests which have led contemporary scholars to misread the interaction between Eusebius' theological and political works. But none of these articles was so straightforward as an attempt to squeeze the past into a Foucauldian framework; and Foucault himself is a descendant of those fathers upon whom his thought has been set to work. His work not only draws on and deals with patristic thinkers such as Gregory of Nyssa but is also, more generally, an attempt to grapple with the philosophical legacy of Christian Europe.

Singh's article discussed the interaction between Eusebius' political hermeneutics and his scriptural exegesis, arguing for the existence of a hermeneutical circle in which politics shapes exegesis and exegesis shapes politics. I want to suggest, as one possible answer to the question of what should be the relationship between past and present, patristics and theology, Athens and Jerusalem, a similar hermeneutical circle: it is not just that, as Foucault says, studying the past enables us to write the history of the present, but that the study of the present enables us to write the history of the past; not just that, as Burrus says, 'to retell the history of doctrine is to rewrite theology', but that the present enables us to retell the history of the past, and to rewrite theology is to retell the history of doctrine. Slavoj Žižek discusses the notion of 'redemption through repetition', arguing, in the context of Marxist politics, that a successful revolution changes not only the future but also the past: when one revolution succeeds, preceding failed attempts are transformed from mere historical dead

ends into precursors, augurs, forebears of the successful revolution.[8] This is, in some ways, a variation of the idea that the dead live on in their descendants, that children may bring shame or honour to their ancestors. Aquinas would have meant something different if history had ended with the scholastics; as the father of *nouvelle théologie* or of Radical Orthodoxy, he becomes almost a new man; and I think we can be confident that the last word on Aquinas has yet to be spoken. This retrospective influence raises all sorts of questions for the practice of patristics: what does it mean to appeal to the authority of tradition if that tradition is something which is shaped by as well as shaping us? What does it mean to honour our ancestors, and how can they speak if they are always being spoken (for)?

Finally, Newheiser, Elgendy and Singh have all offered fairly optimistic discussions of Foucault's emphasis on the creative role of power. Newheiser highlighted the creativity involved in the process of setting the limits of Christian community and acceptable Christian practice both in the process of early Christian doctrinal debates and in contemporary readings of those debates. He argued that a fuller understanding of this process through the sort of historical practice Foucault makes possible enables us to rework the relations of power within which we are caught. Singh exposed the mutually constitutive roles of politics and theology within Eusebius' work and stressed that this mutual implication is not necessarily something to be feared. He rightly emphasised that Eusebius is far from the only theologian to be embroiled in politics. Elgendy's article was more concerned with the question of the practices which enable individuals and communities to disentangle themselves from the web of power relations, and ended by calling for a discursive peaceableness across disciplinary borders.

I want to sound a more pessimistic note than this. That power is productive does not mean it is not also oppressive. As has been hinted at but not particularly emphasised, sometimes what power creates is a zone of powerlessness, a class of people who are silenced and abused. The construction of doctrinal boundaries creates categories of heretics; the construction of ecclesiastical hierarchies represented a gradual exclusion of almost an entire gender from positions of authority within the church. Defenders of Eusebius have been keen to dissociate him from Constantine not simply because they fear that politics contaminates theology but because of real concerns about Constantine's particular politics. Elgendy is right that an antagonistic model of interaction between different groups can be destructive and pointless. Foucault, Newheiser, Elgendy and Singh are right that knowledge and power are inseparable, and that the world cannot be straightforwardly divided into those who have power and those who do not. But there is also an important strand of the inheritance of Christian thought which emphasises that sometimes the rich get rich by making others

[8] Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009), 78.

poor; that the powerful exercise power by taking it from others, and that the knowledgeable maintain their knowledge by keeping it from the ignorant. Sometimes there is a demand for justice, for righteousness, that is simple enough to cut through the complex webs of power and knowledge. And this brings us full circle, because this demand depends for its authority on the claim to a pedigree, not to a genealogy, on the claim to speak, to demand justice, in the name of God, of universal truth, of authority. I wonder if it is here that Foucault falls short.

To summarise, some of the questions that these articles open up are as follows: what is the relationship within patristics between genealogy and pedigree, between the critique of history and of origins and the appeal to the authority of history and of origins? What is the relationship between past and present, patristics and theology, Athens and Jerusalem? And finally, how are we to balance the recognition of the complexity of the interactions between power and knowledge with the demand for justice? None of these are new questions, but Newheiser, Elgendy and Singh have offered valuable insights and fresh perspectives which promise to propel us towards further fruitful discussions.

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