“The common root of meaning and nonmeaning”

Derrida, Foucault, and the Transformation of the Transcendental Question

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One way Foucault’s and Derrida’s debate on the History of Madness has been framed is as articulating the methodological contrast of their respective endeavors. At stake in the debate on this reading is the way in which archaeology or discourse analysis in Foucault’s sense, and Derridean deconstruction relate to each other. This is a rich question and in what follows, I focus on just one of its dimensions – the transformation of the transcendental question that is at stake primarily on Derrida’s side of the debate.

The transformation of the transcendental question is in fact a project that, in general, Foucault and Derrida share, even if they pursue it in diverging ways. At first, Derrida’s and Foucault’s debate on The History of Madness and the Cogito might give us the impression that it is only Derrida who insists on the transcendental question, where Foucault wants to leave it behind. While Derrida returns time and again to Foucault’s preface of the 1961 edition of the History of Madness which interrogates the conditions of possibility of Foucault’s own endeavor, Foucault seems to respond by deeming such questions dispensable and characterizing the pursuit of them as misguided. Indeed, he cuts this preface from the 1972 edition, abstains from any direct reaction to this line of questioning, and re-articulates his whole endeavor as an attempt to free himself from the foundational claims of philosophy that, according to Foucault, continue to dominate Derrida’s discourse.¹

However, if we consider Derrida’s and Foucault’s projects more broadly, it seems misleading to oppose them as either obstinately sticking to or blatantly dismissing the
transcendental project. We fail to appreciate what Derrida is aiming at if we depict him as merely reaffirming the foundational claim of philosophy and as insisting on transcendental questions of the canonical sort; he rather seeks to transform our understanding of transcendental conditions by, first, rearticulating the relation between the empirical and the transcendental, and second, by outlining a series of investigations in which the conditions of possibility of a certain act or practice turn out to be conditions for the impossibility of its purity. And we trivialize Foucault’s endeavor, if we equate his remarkable form of “happy positivism”2 with positivism of the traditional sort.3 His historical undertaking is not to just recount a certain body of events or facts, but to give a historical account of how certain objects and facts, subjects and modes of speaking have become possible at all. Foucault’s archaeology of the human sciences, for example, does not recount a chronological succession of ideas, but tries to unearth deep, historically shifting discursive presuppositions that make certain ideas or judgments intelligible in the first place.4 Far from eliminating the investigation of transcendental conditions, Foucault rather wants to modify our understanding of such conditions in terms of the idea of an “historical apriori.”5

It is beyond the scope of this essay to follow both Derrida and Foucault equally in their attempts at transforming the transcendental question. I rather focus on a deeper understanding of Derrida’s transformation of the transcendental question in order to develop a different understanding of Derrida’s position vis-à-vis Foucault’s History of Madness. By developing the way in which Derrida turns the transcendental approach, it will be possible to bring out a deeper affinity with Foucault’s project than first suggested by the debate and get past the false impression that there is nothing more to it than two incompatible approaches talking past each other. This debate is not the confrontation of a traditional transcendental, philosophical inquiry on the one hand and a positivist, historicist account on the other hand, but, as I will argue, rather the conflict of two ambitious transformations of the transcendental approach. Realizing this can give us a
different take on the true stakes of this debate: Instead of solely focusing on the usual question whose reading of Descartes is more convincing or who seems more evasive – Derrida in neglecting the bulk of Foucault’s substantive historical theses or Foucault in evading the question of the very possibility of a history of madness – we gain access to a more far-reaching issue: how to understand the ways in which Derrida and Foucault rearticulate the very project of critique.

How does the transcendental question come up in Derrida’s Cogito essay? Derrida starts his critical essay by distinguishing two projects that are implied in Foucault’s investigation. According to Derrida, Foucault’s dominant project in the History of Madness is an “archaeology of ... silence” (HMP xxviii): Foucault ventures to tell the history of a complex and extended exclusion of madness that interrupts any possible dialogue between reason and madness, and that thereby systematically silences madness: “[M]odern man no longer communicates with the madman” (HMP xxviii). Derrida points out that Foucault himself, more or less explicitly, acknowledges the deep problems which surround such an archaeology of silence. How can we moderns write the history of our very own limits: the history of “obscure gestures” of exclusion “through which a culture rejects something which for it will be the Exterior,” gestures which have been “necessarily forgotten as soon as they are accomplished” (HMP xxix, emphasis added)? How do we avoid our attempts to include the silence of madness, or to make this silence speak, turning out to be the last ruse of its confinement? And in telling this history how do we overcome the continuation of the exclusion of madness, if the “possibility of history” itself is tied to this very exclusion, as Foucault himself argues (HMP xxxii)?

Derrida suggests that these problems lead us to a second, divergent endeavor that is also present in Foucault’s book, even if only implicitly and partly repressed. Derrida characterizes this other endeavor as an inquiry into the “common root of meaning and nonmeaning,” (CH 43/68) the “unitary foundation” or “unitary ground” (CH 39/62) of reason and unreason – a ground on
which we have to draw in the attempt to tell, and hence to exceed, the history of the interruption of the dialogue between reason and its other. In order to delineate this common root and to show how it modifies our perspective on the history of madness, Derrida turns to Descartes. Foucault presents Descartes’ *Meditations* as symptomatic of the age of the great confinement insofar as Descartes explicitly excludes madness from consideration in the first meditation. Now, Derrida suggests that we can attain a richer interpretation of the Cartesian gesture which shows that he does not exclude madness in the way Foucault suggests. Descartes’ attempt to attain an unquestionable foundation for our knowledge rather leads us to a hyperbolic understanding of the Cogito that points to a common ground of meaning and nonmeaning. In his critical responses to Derrida, Foucault rejects this reading of Descartes. It seems to me that Foucault does so, not only because he understands Descartes differently, but also because he takes Derrida to merely repeat a gesture of transcendental philosophy that stifles the possibility of any history of reason and unreason. In doing so, Foucault fails to appreciate that Derrida tries to delineate an understanding of conditions of possibility that is quite alien to the way in which the philosophical tradition has itself understood transcendental conditions in general and the Cogito especially. The hyperbolic Cogito that Derrida outlines is precisely not meant to preclude, but to account for the possibility of a history of reason and unreason.

In order to get a more adequate understanding of Derrida’s position in this debate, we thus need to get clearer about the peculiar character of the transcendental conditions Derrida tries to delineate. In what follows, I begin by schematically distinguishing different ways of understanding the transformation of the transcendental question in Derrida’s work more generally (I). I then turn to the ways in which these different understandings are at play in his interpretation of Descartes (II). In a third section, I will briefly indicate that the two main
complications of the transcendental have counterparts in Foucault’s own approach (III). I will close with some considerations of the implications for the debate on the History of Madness (IV).

I.

How can we generally conceive of Derrida’s relation to transcendental philosophy? According to a first way of understanding, suggested by the Cogito essay, Derrida’s take on the transcendental question amounts to a *project of radicalization*. With an exquisitely German word – one that is used primarily with regard to metaphysics and to cars – we could specify this radicalization as a project of *Tieferlegung*, of descending the level. If we understand Derrida in these terms, he is interested in something that is “older,” more fundamental than the conditioning structures identified as fundamental in the philosophies he deconstructs. On this account, Derrida seems to try to identify an origin even “more originary” than the one already identified, a condition even more fundamental than the one already described. Sometimes this understanding is subsumed under the term “ultra-transcendental.” Although Derrida gives the term a different twist, as we will see, it is understandable that one might associate it with a descending of the level. Derrida’s project could be *ultra*-transcendental in the sense of being even more transcendental than transcendental philosophy: it would ask after conditions of possibility that are broader or more fundamental than the transcendental conditions that Cartesian, Kantian or Husserlian forms of philosophy understand as enabling our forms of rational cognition and action. Radicalization in this sense would mean that Derrida tries to outdo or overbid preceding philosophical endeavors.

It is hard to deny that there are elements in Derrida’s rhetoric that give rise to such an understanding. In the Cogito essay we see this in his frequent talk of a common root (CH 39/62, 46/68) or a unitary ground (CH 39/62) that lies at the foundation of reason and
unreason, reason and madness: a root or a ground that is “older” than their distinction and that is the ground in which this distinction can take place. But there are a number of reasons to be wary of this characterization of the transformation of the transcendental question: Derrida repeatedly criticizes other philosophers – most prominently amongst them is Heidegger – for merely outdoing or overbidding the foundational project of philosophy present in former approaches without properly displacing the logics of founding. And Derrida often hastens to qualify his talk of a common root or unitary ground or more originary origin by saying that they are common or unitary or older only “in a very strange way,” which entails precisely that they do not designate a positive commonality, unity or origin. In the Cogito essay, Derrida points explicitly to the danger that we might understand the unitary ground of reason and unreason in terms of an “original presence, thereby confirming metaphysics in its fundamental operation” (CH 40/65). So it seems clear, if Derrida is indeed trying to point at something that is “more fundamental” than the established conditions of possibility, he cannot mean a condition that relates to what it conditions in the same way the former conditions have related to what they make possible. Otherwise Derrida would reproduce the same type of project that he is out to transform. Hence, instead of a radicalization in the sense of merely descending the level, Derrida’s decisive move in transforming the transcendental question must lie somewhere else. It resides not so much in descending the level at which he locates the conditions, but rather in complicating the way we understand conditions of possibility: the very way in which they enable and condition the conditioned.17

It is not absurd to construe the transition from one transcendental program to the next in terms of a radicalization. But for Derrida – a philosopher who does not directly present a positive transcendental philosophy of his own, but rather presents critical readings of diverse transcendental philosophies in order to unfold some of their implications and to transform our
understanding of them – it is not the level, but the form of the conditioning which is decisive. It might be helpful in this regard to compare and contrast the step that happens from Descartes, Kant and Husserl to Derrida with the step that takes place from Descartes to Kant. According to a proposition by James Conant, we should distinguish between a Cartesian and a Kantian variety of skepticism:\textsuperscript{18} Where Cartesian skepticism is mainly concerned with the truth of various cognitions, the Kantian skeptic asks whether our cognition has objective purport in the first place. Instead of searching for a foundation of certainty that allows us to ensure the truth of our cognitions, Kant tries to make out conditions that make experience so much as possible. He tries to identify a ground on the basis of which it can be averted that our “perceptions would ... not belong to any experience, consequently would be without an object, merely a blind play of representations, less even than a dream.”\textsuperscript{19} Where the Cartesian skeptic is worried that our experience of the world might just be a dream and that our sensible knowledge is illusory, Kant thinks we should find it astonishing and in need of justification that our experience has the mere unity of being about something at all and does not disintegrate into something that is even less than a dream.

Depicted in these terms, it seems quite appropriate to call Kantian skepticism a radicalization of the Cartesian variety, in that it questions what the Cartesian skeptic had still taken for granted. Such a radicalization has deep consequences for the shape skeptical doubts take and for the type of responses that they provoke.\textsuperscript{20} However, in both cases we are confronted with a fundamentally similar dynamic. Skeptical questions lead us to the conditions for cognitive success. Even if Kant brackets the question of actual truth and falsity in order to raise the more fundamental issue whether our cognition has the necessary form to be about something at all, the transcendental conditions he then specifies are meant to ensure the possibility of such contentful cognition. And in both the Cartesian and the Kantian case we are ultimately directed at a
transcendental ground – the Cartesian Cogito or the Kantian Ich denke of transcendental apperception – that resides on a different level than what it grounds or unifies.

Along these lines, radicalization for Derrida would involve trying to reveal the positive conditions for an even more fundamental cognitive achievement, not only beyond truth or falsity, but even beyond contentful or contentless cognition, experience or un-experience (something “less than a dream”), taken for granted by Descartes and Kant alike. Such a radicalization would thus involve identifying a ground that enables this more basic cognitive achievement in a way similar to the Cogito’s grounding of objective validity or the enabling of experience by the I think of transcendental apperception.21 Rather than pursuing the same type of project on a more fundamental level, however, Derrida investigates existing foundational philosophical projects and questions the very way in which the respective grounds might enable or ensure the requisite cognitive achievements. If we can indeed call Derrida’s approach “radical,” it is not because he is primarily interested in a more basic stratum of our cognitive achievements, but rather because he directs our attention at the presuppositions and the form of transcendental accounting itself. Derrida thereby seeks to modify our understanding of the way in which transcendental conditions might relate to the conditioned.

There are two basic complications in the understanding of conditions of possibility that are crucial to Derrida’s work. The first one (i) questions the sense of enabling and tries to reveal conditions of possibility to be simultaneously conditions of impossibility; the second one (ii) questions the relation of the empirical and the transcendental. Whereas the first complication turns the endeavor of transcendental justification into a project of quasi-transcendental accounting, the second complication implies a critical investigation of the possibility of transcendental accounting: a project of ultra-transcendental questioning.22
(i) The *quasi-transcendental* form of inquiry works to show that the conditions of possibility of a certain type of act or capacity are simultaneously the conditions of *impossibility* for its purity. This is the type of complication that we find in most of Derrida’s major analyses. Iterability, for example, is presented as a condition of possibility of meaning and at the same time as the condition of the impossibility of its pure determinacy. *Différance* might be understood as the condition of possibility of identity, but at the same time subverts each identity through its differential constitution. The Cogito might be regarded as the condition of possibility of reason, but it simultaneously seems to endanger each determinate form of reason and opens it up to the threat of unreason. Now, this cannot be established just by decreeing that we ought to construct conditions of possibility always also as conditions of impossibility. Only a detailed analysis can show that certain conditions of possibility are of such a nature that they are at the same time conditions of the impossibility of the purity of what they condition. By simply referring to this quasi-transcendental project, we haven’t demonstrated anything against the aspirations of transcendental philosophy, yet. We have only clarified what it is that Derrida aims to show.

This project of describing conditions of possibility as conditions of impossibility should not be construed as skeptical or nihilistic, as a primarily negative endeavor aiming to show that transcendental philosophy simply fails. If transcendental arguments are understood as a response to skeptical doubts, it could seem that Derrida allies himself with the skeptic insofar as he shows that certain prominent transcendental conditions do not ensure the cognitive success they are usually taken to warrant. However, this is a deep misunderstanding of Derrida’s project. Critiques of skepticism, relativism, and historicism are to be found throughout his whole work, so it is unlikely that he aims to show that the skeptic prevails. In his attempt to show that the conditions of possibility are tied up with conditions of impossibility, Derrida is trying neither to strengthen the skeptic, nor to merely subvert the whole transcendental project. He rather aims at
re-conceiving our notion of conditioning and of enabling, and our sense of success and failure. The point is not to claim the ubiquity of failure nor the sheer impossibility of definite success, but rather to point out the complex way in which success is only won against, in and even through, ‘failure.’ The conditions of possibility of our practices are aporetic. This thought is not the ground of their nullity but rather of their complexity. Their complexity – the entanglement of success and failure – has both a negative and a positive aspect. Usually in Derrida’s reception the negative aspect is highlighted: Every success seems to be haunted by failure and tainted by doubt. Yet especially in his later writings, Derrida is much more interested in the positive aspect: in events, practices, or ideas that are only possible through their impossibility (the gift, the pardon, justice etc.).

The co-implication of success and failure is therefore most adequately expressed not in terms of a generalized doubt, but in an expressive intensity that characterizes performances that truly succeed. If we understand success as an achievement and not just as mechanical repetition, success in the full sense is marked by its exceeding the mere fulfillment of conditions of success and by not merely overcoming but drawing on ‘failure’. We are here encountering a failure that is not external to success, but a failure that is “constitutive of success”.

(ii) Let us now briefly turn to the second dimension in which Derrida tries to complicate our understanding of conditions of possibility: the ultra-transcendental inquiry. Vis-à-vis different varieties of transcendental philosophy that try to elucidate a given type of act, capacity, or practice by delineating something that ensures or guarantees its possibility, Derrida reflects on the very presuppositions of such forms of transcendental accounting. On what grounds is the transcendental inquiry and the grounding relation that it describes possible? One major issue that Derrida returns to time and again in this regard is the difference and relation between the empirical and the transcendental. In Of Grammatology and Speech and Phenomena, Derrida had designated his own approach as “ultra-transcendental” precisely in view of the opposition
between empiricism and transcendental philosophy. His project strives to be “ultra-transcendental” insofar as he tries to question the critical project without relapsing into a pre-critical naïveté. His project therefore has to go through the transcendental endeavor and question it from within. It does not try to deny the right to the transcendental question or the fact that it allows us to accede a possibility beyond what is given to us empirically. Rather, it highlights the way in which the transcendental condition is irreducibly related to the empirical level. That concerns both our ability to arrive at a transcendental condition (by departing from concrete, specific experiences) and the mode of that condition’s actuality (as being implied or present in enabled experiences). Derrida exposes this problematic especially in his analyses of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology.

In his Introduction to *The Origin of Geometry*, he explicates the fundamental historicity of ideal objects in Husserl and highlights the role that Husserl accords to language and writing as conditions of possibility of transcendental historicity. Derrida points out that the ideality at which Husserl arrives by reducing and bracketing factual history, in turn reveals itself to be dependent on forms of mundane, empirical embodiment which open it up to the possibility of destruction and disclose a possibility usually foreign to transcendentalism: “the possibility of truth’s disappearance.” In *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida engages in the ultra-transcendental investigation by raising the question of what allows for the necessary relation between the empirical and the transcendental subject in transcendental phenomenology. His title for this desideratum is: an ultra-transcendental concept of life. The ultra-transcendental line of questioning argues that any properly critical transcendental endeavor must consider and account for the articulation of the empirical and the transcendental. This leads us to a different understanding of the mutual dependence and mutual contamination of the empirical and the transcendental.
Given the way in which Derrida executes these ultra-transcendental investigations, they do not lead to a separate new level of further conditions that account for the relation of transcendental conditions and empirical phenomena, but rather produce a rearticulation of their relation. In Derrida’s own analyses, transcendental conditions cannot be specified once and for all, independent of the particular contexts and varying empirical experiences that need to be accounted for. We don’t have any timeless knowledge of the ideal, it can only be actualized and known from within our historical, contingent, factual experience.

II.
How can we locate these two complications in Derrida’s Cogito essay? I had said that Derrida’s strategy with regard to Foucault’s project might appear to search for an even more fundamental ground in which reason and unreason are as yet undivided. Accordingly, he would try to show that, contrary to Foucault’s reading, Descartes has precisely uncovered such a ground that underlies reason as well as unreason. In this way, Derrida would aim to show that Foucault should rather investigate this common ground than confine himself to an archaeology of silence. The crucial point is, however, that Derrida is pointing not only to the problems that surround an archaeology of silence, but just as much to the problems of the possible deviating project of delineating the common ground of reason and unreason. Most importantly, Derrida emphasizes that this deviating project fails entirely if this “unitary ground” of meaning and nonmeaning is conceived as an “original presence.” That means that the articulation of reason and unreason cannot reside in the fact that they share an underlying unity. That is why the second part of the essay is so important, as Derrida takes Descartes to have reached a more appropriate and more complicated articulation of reason and unreason. They do not share a common ground, they rather meet at a certain “point”: the point of the Cogito. In articulating this point at which reason
and unreason meet, Derrida does not deny that the classical age is marked by an exclusion and confinement of madness, but proposes a different understanding of this exclusion. This different understanding is dependent on the (i) quasi-transcendental and (ii) the ultra-transcendental complication he in general works to introduce.

(i) Derrida takes Descartes to employ a method of radical reduction that brings out a certain inner tension in the foundational, transcendental project. According to the transcendental tradition, in order for a condition to be really able to ground and make possible the conditioned, it has to be qualitatively heterogeneous from what it conditions. Just in this sense, Descartes’ method of radical doubt brings to light that only something that differs from all our determinate cogitationes can serve as a true foundation. By means of an epoché of the totality of our sensibly informed knowledge and, in a second step, even our intellectual knowledge, he arrives at something that can escape doubt in so far as it is qualitatively different from all these distinct elements of knowledge. And that which escapes all doubts as the ground of our cognition is ironically something that is operative precisely in this very doubt itself. What is more, the heterogeneity requirement implies that there is an irreducible distance between the Cogito and each of its cogitationes. The Cogito that grounds all the cogitationes in their validity is so far beyond these cogitationes that it doesn’t itself possess the form of knowledge per se; it can manifest itself just as much in entertaining a thought as in doubting this very thought. This means that on Derrida’s account the Cogito appears as a condition of possibility of the validity of our knowledge that, at the same time, is the condition of the impossibility of its certainty: In order to ground our thought, the Cogito has to be transcendent; but if it is, this also means that it gives us the very ability to exceed and transgress every thought grounded by it. I will not try to defend this as a reading of Descartes; I only want to expose the main thrust of Derrida’s reading: that in order for
the Cogito to actually fulfill the grounding and enabling function it is supposed to, it takes on such a shape that it at the same time endangers what it enables.

Of course, Derrida does not want to suggest that Descartes directly aims for or rests content with such a result. On the contrary, once this hyperbolic Cogito is reached, a new movement begins in which the rational order is reconstructed. In the course of this movement it is revealed, among other things, that the idea of an almighty being that deceives me is contradictory. There is a special irony, not explicitly noted by Derrida, in the fact that we only reach the ultimate point of certainty, the Cogito, by means of an hypothesis – the hypothesis of an evil genius – that this Cogito, once it has grasped itself as a certainty, has to dismiss. Derrida recognizes the fact that Descartes eventually excludes madness and occludes the precarious character of the hyperbolic Cogito. But he maintains that on its way to this exclusion Descartes had opened up a radical doubt that does not directly exclude madness, and cannot help but include it in the hyperbolic Cogito. In this sense Derrida does not deny the exclusion of madness in the classical age that Foucault demonstrates so forcefully, but rather proposes that we can attain a deeper understanding of its complex and ambiguous form if we understand it against the background of the quasi-transcendental complication.

(ii) The second dimension of complicating the transcendental project is present in the essay as well. Derrida seems at first glance to object to Foucault that he is in danger of relapsing into a pre-critical and a merely historicist project, or at least that Foucault himself does not take seriously the questions that he himself raises: how to produce a work on unreason, if unreason is by definition the absence of the work? how to locate the origin of the division of reason and unreason historically, if this division is the condition of possibility of history itself? But these critical considerations are not meant to discredit Foucault's historical project in the name of a philosophical investigation that would be situated outside of history: Derrida emphasizes,
explicitly, that he does not want to object to Foucault’s historical project in the name of a
philosophia perennis.

Consider the “Cogito”: We arrive at the Cogito in departing from a natural subject and
its experience, by going through natural doubt and a natural reassurance (a normality that de
facto prevails and as such belongs to the very structure of meaning and sense), and by then
radicalizing this doubt. We arrive at the Cogito not outside a historically determined empirical
moment, but by hyperbolically ‘transgressing’ it from within. This Cogito at which we arrive,
secondly, can only become operative and effective insofar as it is again temporalized, turned into
a determinate appearance and enacted as the foundation of a normative order. Derrida writes:

By separating, within the Cogito, on the one hand, hyperbole (which I maintain cannot
be enclosed in a factual and determined historical structure, for it is the project of
exceeding every finite and determined totality), and, on the other hand, that in
Descartes’s philosophy (or in the philosophy supporting the Augustinian Cogito or
the Husserlian Cogito as well) which belongs to a factual, historical structure, I am
not proposing the separation of the wheat from the tares in every philosophy in the
name of some philosophia perennis. Indeed, it is exactly the contrary that I am
proposing. In question is a way of accounting for the very historicity of philosophy.
(CH 60/93f.)

So Derrida is not, at least if we trust his words, aiming at isolating an ahistorical, ultra-
transcendental stratum. Rather he points to the very articulation of the transcendental and the
empirical: the “transition” or “dialogue” between hyperbole and finite structure. Such a dialogue
is the very element of a history of knowledge: only in the articulation between finite structure and
hyperbole can knowledge become the object and subject of history. In this sense, Derrida’s
reading of Descartes is supposed to elucidate the very form of historicity with which Foucault
must be engaged.
Derrida’s Cogito essay may seem especially prone to the view that he is pursuing ever more fundamental conditions, an “origin that is more originary” (RP 577/283), resides outside of history and is the exclusive object of philosophical investigation. But a closer look suggests that he is not so much trying to descend the level of transcendental inquiry. Rather he complicates the way in which we understand transcendental conditions: he tries to show that in the case of the Cogito these conditions exceed and at the same time depend on their empirical-historical determination. They enable and at the same time disable determinate shapes of reason.

As I briefly indicated at the outset, the two dimensions of complication that I have just located in Derrida’s reading of Descartes connect to two general tendencies in Foucault’s own work: his effort to redescribe putative conditions and origins in a way that captures their multiplicity and contradictoriness, and his attempt to reach a different notion of the apriori that he calls historical. Regarding the first dimension of the complication of conditions, it is a persistent motif of Foucault’s work across its diverse methodological paradigms to question the idea of a univocal origin. For the archaeological level that Foucault investigates in Les mots et les choses in order to outline the deep historical conditions of possibility of certain forms of knowledge, it is vital that this level can explain conflicting and even contradicting theories of the same epoch. Foucault is therefore not concerned with conditions of possibility of a single type of cognitive success, but with conditions of a whole field of conflicting positivities. For the genealogical method that avoids explicit reference to the transcendental, but continues to investigate the deep conditions of forms, objects and subjects of knowledge, it is obvious that it aims at a multiplication of beginnings. Instead of tracing phenomena to the “inviolable identity of their origin,” genealogy is supposed to refer them back to the “dissension of other things,” “disparity,”
“numberless beginnings”.38 In understanding the conditions and beginnings of our ways of being and knowing in such a way, Foucault aims at conditions that can account for the way in which our being and knowledge is historical. In so far as the conditions of our being allow for conflicting actualizations and in so far as our constitution is to be traced back to multiple beginnings, it becomes possible to understand to what extent we can transgress the achieved form of our constitution. For all the positivism to which Foucault likes to attest, his positivism is only “happy” to the extent that he understands the positivities as inherently multiple and as rooted in conditions that can exceed them.

Concerning the second dimension, we can point to the idea of a historical apriori that aims for a historicization of the transcendental. Contrary to most versions of such a historicization, Foucault is not merely trying to define “a formal a priori that is also endowed with a history,”39 but outlines an apriori of a different sort. This apriori consists of conditions that are historical in a double sense: they are not only subject to historical shifts and differ from epoch to epoch, they are also historical in that they are themselves the conditions of history. They are not merely formal conditions of possibility, but historical conditions of actuality: conditions of the emergence, the existence and the life of statements.40 Insofar as these conditions are both constitutive conditions of history as well as themselves subject to history, these conditions complicate a clear cut division between the empirical and the transcendental.41 To understand this complication properly, however, we have to remind ourselves that Foucault is deeply critical of a certain confusion and superimposition of the empirical and the transcendental that marks our epoch and has subjected us to a new kind of dogmatic slumber: The anthropological idea of man introduces an empirico-transcendental doublet that undermines the critical difference of the empirical and the transcendental in such a way that it threatens to reintroduce a precritical naïveté.42 We have to assume, that Foucault’s concept of a historical apriori is supposed precisely
to avoid such a relapse, even though it itself seems to aim at bridging the gap between the empirical and the transcendental. The difference between the anthropological slumber and the archaeological enlightenment might be put like this: Where the anthropological paradigm tries to give the empirical a transcendental value and naturalizes and de-historicizes the conditions of our knowledge, Foucault attempts to historicize the transcendental, without giving up the critical difference between the condition and the conditioned and the transgressive excess of the conditions over what they condition.\textsuperscript{43} If that is true, Foucault pursues a line of questioning that is very close to Derrida’s attempt to outline a mutual dependence of the empirical and the transcendental without giving up their critical difference.\textsuperscript{44}

Now, both dimensions are developed and articulated in Foucault’s work not so much by a direct reflection on the transcendental philosophical program, but by a highly original type of historical work. It seems that the transformation of the transcendental program is for Foucault not the main focus or the ultimate end of his endeavor, but rather a means to enable different historical accounts of our discursive practices. It is a means, to be more precise, that for Foucault seems to have rather a strategic value and that can in turn be substituted by different theoretical levers. Although I would defend the claim that the structure of Foucault’s work never ceases to be informed by the transcendental question of the conditions of possibility of our modes of being and knowing, the transcendental vocabulary and apparatus definitely recedes into the background: Foucault drops the notion of the historical \textit{apriori} after \textit{The Archaeology of Knowledge} and repeats, time and again, that he in fact wants to avoid transcendental terms and substitute them with historical ones.\textsuperscript{45} What seems to be a complete rejection of the transcendental, is however dependent on a restriction of the term to its traditional shape. Rather than giving up the critical questions raised by transcendental philosophy, Foucault chooses to continue the transformation of the transcendental under different names and masks.
IV.

By pursuing the transformation of the transcendental question, we have seen that there is a deeper methodological affinity between Derrida and Foucault, even if they pursue this transformation according to a different line of flight. Whereas Derrida, departing from the most diverse discourses, directs our attention to their transcendental complications time and again, Foucault tries to utilize these complications in order to project different historical accounts of how we have become the peculiar beings we are. Against this background it becomes understandable that Foucault was frustrated that Derrida did not actively engage with his rich historical account of the different regimes of the separation of reason, unreason and madness and considered the (quasi-)transcendental discussion of Descartes as beside the point. From Foucault’s perspective, Derrida’s insistent focus on the audacious point of the Cogito seems to leave us with a result much too abstract: an overall concession that the reason is rooted in a point at which it touches unreason, a concession which does not help us see how to supersede the forms of exclusion that have become prevalent in the classical age. Only by telling the actual detailed history of this exclusion does it become a truth, and not merely an abstract certainty, that we could live and be ruled differently. Only such a historical enlightenment can truly reach for the aims of critique in the full sense of the word.46

It seems to me that Derrida could not disagree with the necessity of such a historical enlightenment – and his works can prove that he is in fact not interested in an abstract or schematic lesson to be won in the investigation of transcendental approaches, but rather in specific and material interventions into the ways we understand ourselves and shape our practices.47 The point of such interventions is, just as Foucault says, to give a “new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom.”48 By insisting on the Cartesian Cogito
so excessively in this exchange, Derrida has not tried to demonstrate that the mere mundane history of our ways of relating to and treating madness is without proper value. On the contrary, the specific interpretation of the Cogito is supposed to enrich and extend our understanding of the complexity and depth of this very history of madness. This is the case in mainly two respects: with regard to the very form of the exclusion that the classical age performs and in view of our understanding of the conditions of possibility of a history of madness itself.

In the first respect, we have to start from a fact that seems buried under the fierce polemics of both protagonists, but that is important to note: Derrida’s essay does not in any way try to repudiate Foucault’s critique of the great confinement of madness, nor his linking it to Descartes’ “infinitivist” rationalism (CH 58ff./89ff., 310/90). Derrida explicitly affirms that Descartes participates in the exclusion of madness that Foucault tries to trace.49 What must be taken into account, he contends, is that Descartes excludes madness only by opening reason up to its possibility.50 The relation between exclusion and inclusion is, therefore, not that of a simple contrast. It is much more ambiguous, in a way that in fact seems congenial to the type of history that Foucault tries to write: a history of madness in which the inclusion and exclusion of madness, its recognition and denial, its liberation and enslavement are revealed to be complicit in various ways.51

Secondly, contrary to some of its passages that seem to praise all philosophy (CH 309/88) and to grant it an irreducible privilege, the hyperbolic cogito that Derrida traces is not supposed to be exclusively active in the works of philosophy. Derrida rather presents his whole reading as an attempt to elucidate the condition of possibility of the voice recounting the history of madness (CH 58/88).52 What Foucault sarcastically describes as the position of the philosopher – that he seems to be, in Derrida’s world, “on the far side and the near side of any event” (RP 576/283) – seems structurally necessary for the voice that recounts history. Consider Les mots et le
chose: If we take it seriously that the different orders of knowledge that Foucault lays out are incommensurable and incompatible, how do we have to understand the voice that articulates the intelligibility of each one of them? This narrative seems to be dependent on a Cogito that exceeds these different historically determinate forms of reason. Only by means of the mad audacity of the narrator’s Cogito can he or she tell the story of different orders of knowledge that appear to each other as errant, nonsensical, mad.53

By following Derrida’s transformation of the transcendental question in this essay, we have seen that Derrida and Foucault cannot be opposed in the way their debate suggests: as the conflict of a traditional philosophical program that “denies all pertinence to the event” (RP 577/283 – Foucault’s polemical account of Derrida) and a positivist, historicist program (Derrida’s take on one of the dangers that Foucault’s book runs). Instead, we are confronted with the conflict of two closely related transformations of the transcendental approach that strive to account for and enable a critical history of reason and unreason. Certainly, this does not dissolve their disagreement, but it allows us to locate it more adequately and to open a more fruitful debate between Focaultian archaeology and Derridean deconstruction, guided by a shared question: how to renew the project of critique.
1 For the latter see especially Foucault’s first response to Derrida (RP 578/284). Foucault goes as far as to suggest that it would have been better had he omitted the whole contested passage on Descartes which, in hindsight, reveals to Foucault that he hadn’t sufficiently freed himself from philosophy.


3 Foucault’s reservations regarding positivism of the classical sort are also prominent in the History of Madness itself: The present form that the exclusion of madness takes is precisely a positivistic attitude that transforms madness into an external object of knowledge. This approach makes any relation to madness as concerning ourselves impossible and precludes the sense that encountering madness may involve an experience of our own ground. In Foucault’s description, this positivism thus contrasts with the depth of a tragic experience of madness that finds in madness not a mere object of knowledge, but an exposition of fundamental conditions of our own being. See e.g. HM (155f./174f.; 339/360; 460/480 et passim).

4 Foucault does not try to specify the conditions that a certain proposition must fulfill in order for it to be true or false, but to be acceptable as an intelligible proposition in a specific discursive formation, to be “in the true,” as Foucault says with Canguilhem’s phrase (Foucault, “The Order of Discourse,” 60).

5 For Foucault’s use of “a priori” in the History of Madness see HM (130/147; 376/397; 528/548); cf. also the characterization of his project as concerning a “constitutive but historically mobile bedrock” (HM 522/541) and the following self-description: “In writing the history of the mad, what we have done – not on the level of a chronology of discoveries, or a history of ideas, but by following the links in the chain of the fundamental structures of experience – is to write the history of the things that made possible the very appearance of a psychology.” (HM 529/548, emphasis added). – It implies a difficult task of its own to determine the precise role and function of the transcendental in Foucault’s shifting methodological paradigms – for a highly instructive discussion of this complex question see Béatrice Han, Foucault’s Critical Project: Between the Transcendental and the Historical (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002). At this point I make no determinate claims about the function of the transcendental in Foucault other than rejecting the idea that Foucault was engaged in a mere dismissal of the transcendental.

6 Certainly, the use of the term “transcendental” might seem questionable in our context, as this is only Kant’s and Husserl’s term, not Descartes’. I use the term here nevertheless, as I think that Derrida conceives of Descartes philosophy as a variant of the transcendental endeavor. For a broad understanding of the term “transcendental philosophy” that has generally informed Derrida’s approach and that describes Descartes as the original founder of the transcendental motif, see Edmund Husserl, The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology, trans. D. Carr (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1970), 68ff., 97ff. (§§ 14, 26).

7 In Foucault’s account, psychoanalysis seems to embody this very danger. Regarding the shifting role of psychoanalysis that according to Foucault, on the one hand, “took up madness at the level of its language” and “restored ... the possibility of a dialogue with unreason” (HM 339/360) and, on the other hand, “will never be able to hear the voices of unreason” (HM 511/530) see Derrida’s JF.

8 That does not mean that Descartes does not partake in the exclusion of madness, as Derrida points out explicitly; this exclusion however only takes place once Descartes has reached the “mad audacity” (CH 56/86) of the Cogito that escapes madness only “because at its own moment, under its own authority, it is valid even if I am mad” (CH 55/85).


11 For this manner of speaking see e.g., Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” in:Margins of Philosophy, trans. A. Bass (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982), 22: “[D]ifférance, in a certain and very strange way, (is) ‘older’ than the ontological difference”.
impossibility of their rigorous purity.”

20. Martin Hägglund, Of Grammatology, 93: “This common root, which is not a root but the concealment of origin and which is not common because it does not come to the same thing except with the unmonotonous insistence of difference ... can be called writing only within the historical enclosure, that is to say within the boundaries of metaphysics.”

21. A clear example where Derrida presents his own project in such a way can be found in his essay “The Ends of Man”: Under the heading of a “reduction of meaning,” Derrida envisages the project of reaching a level below meaning in order to surpass the “reduction to meaning” that is characteristic of Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger in different ways: “determining the possibility of meaning on the basis of a ‘formal’ organization which in itself has no meaning.” It is noteworthy, however, that Derrida understands this not as a project of erasing or destroying meaning, but still as an attempt at a different, more radical account of its very possibility. See Jacques Derrida, “The Ends of Man,” in: Margins of Philosophy, 109–136, here: 134.

22. For a recent example see e.g. Dirk Setton, “I Think, I Am Mad: Derrida, Gaslight and the Irony of the Cogito,” Oxford Literary Review 36:1 (2014): 81–93. Setton thinks that Derrida’s interpretation of the Cogito lends itself to such an ultra-transcendental understanding, but at the same time reveals that such an understanding is a dead end. The reason is this: Insofar as the ultra-transcendental analysis of the Cogito leads us to a “primordial unity, earlier than any determining transcendental unity of reason, encompassing both reason and unreason,” it “provides the condition of possibility of any determined form of reason and unreason,” and that is: it does not explain or elucidate any of them specifically; “it remains unclear how exactly the Cogito in its hyperbolic instant could make anything in particular possible .... Derrida’s gesture of surpassing transcendental philosophy towards ultra-transcendental ‘roots’ thus risks running empty” (86).

12. Cf. Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, trans. G. C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP), 23: “The ontico-ontological difference and its ground (Grund) in the ‘transcendence of Dasein’ ... are not absolutely originary. Différance by itself would be more ‘originary,’ but one would no longer be able to call it ‘origin’ or ‘ground,’ those notions belonging essentially to the history of onto-theology, to the system functioning as the effacing of difference.”

13. For this formulation, see e.g. Jacques Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” in: Margins of Philosophy, 328: “But the condition of possibility of those effects is simultaneously, once again, the condition of their impossibility, of the impossibility of their rigorous purity.”
In this sense, I doubt that it is adequate to call the thought that conditions of possibility are at the same time conditions of impossibility a “transcendental axiom of deconstruction,” as Maxime Doyon does in “The Transcendental Claim of Deconstruction,” 145, 140, 147; emphasis added.


It seems true that Derrida does not take transcendental philosophy to have attained a direct refutation of skepticism. However, this is not to say that we can rest content with a skeptic position, we rather have to advance to the “truth of skepticism,” to use Cavell’s turn of phrase. I take it that a transformed understanding of the transcendental endeavor is supposed to help us attain this goal. — For the sense that it restricts our picture of the transcendental tradition to assume that it can only aim at a direct refutation of skepticism see Paul Franks, “Transcendental Arguments, Reason, and Scepticism,” in: Robert Stern (ed.), Transcendental Arguments: Problems and Prospects (Oxford: Clarendon, 2005), 111–145, here: 113.


“But the strange unity of these two parallels, that which refers the one to the other, does not allow itself to be sundered by them and, by dividing itself, finally joins the transcendental to its other; this unity is life. ... ‘Living’ is thus the name of that which precedes the reduction and finally escapes all the divisions which the latter gives rise to. But this is precisely because it is its own division and its own opposition to its other. ... This concept of life is then grasped in an instance which is no longer that of pretranscendental naiveté, the language of day-to-day life or biological science. But if this ultratranscendental concept of life enables us to conceive life (in the ordinary or the biological sense), and if it has never been inscribed in language, it requires another name.” (Derrida, Speech and Phenomena, 14-15)

Paul Franks calls this the heterogeneity requirement. See Paul Franks, All or Nothing: Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2005), 103ff.

The first step being that Descartes does not only proceed from the Cogito to “sum,” but to “sum res cogitans”: The thinker recognizes himself as a thinking thing. Descartes thereby identifies the Cogito that had been certain only in its hyperbolic momentary act with the reflected cogito (CH 58/89). According to Derrida, this is the beginning of “the hurried repatriation of all mad and hyperbolical wanderings” (CH 58/90).


Cf. Foucault, Order of Things, 83: “One must reconstitute the general system of thought whose network, in its positivity, renders an interplay of simultaneous and apparently contradictory opinions possible. It is this network that defines the conditions that make a controversy or problem possible, and that bears the historicity of knowledge.”

phénoméno
dique, l'origine première d'une science, son projet fondamental et ses conditions radicales de possibilité, on essaiera d'assister aux commencement
s insidieux et multiples d'une science.”


40 Ibid., 127: “[W]hat I mean by the term is an a priori that is not a condition of validity for judgments, but a condition of reality for statements. It is not a question of rediscovering what might legitimate an assertion, but of freeing the conditions of emergence of statements, the law of their coexistence with others, the specific form of their mode of being, the principles according to which they survive, become transformed, and disappear.”

41 In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault indeed claims that, compared to formal a priors, the historical a priori appears as “a purely empirical figure” (128).

42 See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London & New York: Routledge, 2004), 270, 347ff., 371ff. See also Foucault’s introduction to Kant’s *Anthropology*, written at the same time as the *History of Madness* and just as critical of contemporary philosophical anthropologies that claim a “natural access to the fundamental” (Michel Foucault, *Introduction to Kant’s Anthropology*, ed. R. Nigro, trans. R Nigro, K. Briggs, (Cambridge: MIT, 2008), 121). That these issues are directly relevant to the *History of Madness* is already clear from the fact that this book closes with a section on the “anthropological circle” in which we find ourselves entrapped. The deepest confinement of madness and unreason is reached precisely through a certain form of positivist “naiveté” (HM 122/139) and an anthropological conceptualization of madness.

43 Béatrice Han argues that a number of Foucault’s attempts at realizing the transformation of the transcendental in fact relapse into forms of the confusion of the empirical and the transcendental that he himself had attacked. Without denying that Foucault has not been very careful to hold all of his proposals apart from the anthropological confusion of the empirical and the transcendental, it seems obvious to me that he was at least aiming at a third way beyond the alternative of pure transcendalism (a strict division between a formal ahistorical a priori and its completely derivative empirical instantiations) and anthropology (a confusion between the empirical and the transcendental in the knowledge of man).


45 To give just two examples, see again *Titres et travaux*: “D’un mot, il s’agit du problème théorique de la constitution d’une science quand on veut l’analyser non pas en termes transcendantaux, mais en termes d’histoire.” (ibid., 845) as well as his exchange with G. Preti: “Tout au long de ma recherche, je m’efforce, à l’inverse, d’éviter toute référence à ce transcendental, qui serait une condition de possibilité pour toute connaissance.” (Michel Foucault, “Les problèmes de la culture. Un débat Foucault-Preti,” in: *Dits et Ecrits 1954–1988*, Tome III: 1970–1975, eds. Daniel Defert, Francois Ewald, in collaboration with Jacques Lagrange (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 369–380, here: 373). Whenever Foucault distances himself from transcendental terms, he opposes them to historical terms; this suggests that he cannot be targeting the forms of historical-transcendental conditions he had himself specified in his archaeological studies.

46 See especially Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?,” in: Paul Rabinow (ed.), *Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 32–50: “[C]riticism is no longer going to be practiced in the search for formal structures with universal value, but rather as a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying. In that sense, this criticism is not transcendental, and its goal is not that of making a metaphysics possible: it is genealogical in its design and archaeological in its method. Archaeological – and not transcendental – in the sense that it will not seek to identify the universal structures of all knowledge or of all possible moral action, but will seek to treat the instances of discourse that articulate what we think, say, and do as so many historical events. And this critique will be genealogical in the sense that it will not deduce from the form of what we are what it is impossible for us to do and to know; but it will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think. It is not seeking to make possible a metaphysics that has finally become a science; it is seeking to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom.” (45–46)

47 Cf. also Derrida’s characterization of deconstruction as involving *two* registers: a quasi-logical and a genealogical one: “Deconstruction is generally practiced in two ways or two styles, although it most often grafts one on to the other. One takes on the demonstrative and apparently ahistorical allure of logico-formal paradoxes. The other, more
historical or more anamnesic, seems to proceed through readings of texts, meticulous interpretations and genealogies.” (Derrida, *Force of Law*, 957ff.)

48 Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”


50 While Foucault’s first treatment of Descartes seems to deny this and states that “madness, quite simply, is no longer [Descartes’] concern” (HM 46/58), at later points in the book Foucault himself makes clear that things are more complex: Although Descartes’ Cogito appears as “an absolute beginning,” it “should not be forgotten that the evil genius” – and that means: “the possibility of unreason and the sum of all its powers” – actually “has preceded it” (HM 157/175). Descartes thus reaches the Cogito only by opening up to the possibility of an evil genius, a “perpetually threatening power” that concerns not only the individual mind, but “reason itself.” In this sense, the Cartesian progression of doubt is not simply the “exorcism of madness,” as the English translation has it (HM 244), but rather its *conjuration*, as the French original indeed says: “En ce sens la démarche cartésienne du doute est bien la grande conjuration de la folie” (262).

51 In this sense, Foucault’s characterization of the *coup the force* with which Descartes silences madness seems exceptionally unambiguous. – For some instances where Foucault’s history rather turns on ambiguous gestures intertwining inclusion and exclusion, recognition and denial, liberation and enslavement, cf.: the idea that the “strange hospitality” that the early seventeenth century has vis-à-vis madness at the same time excludes the very possibility of a tragic experience of madness (HM 42f./55); that in its exclusion of madness, classical rationalism was, in a way, more receptive to the “peril of unreason, the threatening space of absolute liberty” (HM 156/175) and more revelatory of the “perpetual possibility of unreason” (HM 158/176) than our recent positivism; the fact that the new positive modes of recognition of madness in the modern age exclude madness as a “real element in which the mad would recognize themselves” (HM 205/223); that the supposed “liberation” of madness by the reforms of Pinel and others rather amounted to a new form of confinement by which madness was even more thoroughly separated from the sovereign subject of knowledge that constitutes itself as knowing and mastering madness (HM 461/481); and finally: that psychoanalysis in its attempt to liberate the patient from the asylum to which the former ‘liberators’ had condemned him has continued and even perfected the exclusion (HM 510f./529f.).

52 For this line of questioning see also JF in which Derrida has further engaged with the conditions of possibility of Foucault’s history. As he tries to show there, the narrator of a Foucaultian history has to reflect his own peculiar position in the form of ambiguous figures of his history, such as Freud, that serve as hinges.

53 Foucault stresses the fact that the ideas and theories that “less than twenty years before had been posited and affirmed in the luminous space of understanding … topple down into error, into the realm of fantasy, into non-knowledge,” once a shift on the archaeological level of the episteme has occurred. (Foucault, *Order of Things*, 235)