REFLECTIONS ON FOUCAULT'S CONCEPT OF CRITICAL ONTOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

The article concentrates on Michel Foucault's concept of critical ontology. The emphasis is on the demonstration of the theoretical viability of the concept by way of questions posed by Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt. As a "philosophical ethos" and a "philosophical attitude," critical ontology is explored with regard to the Heideggerian conception of thinking and being in the world. As a philosophical life, in turn, critical ontology is subjected to a discussion that revolves around Arendt's arguments on the predicament of the philosopher in the realm of human affairs. The article concludes that critical ontology is beyond a Heideggerian orientation toward "meditative thinking" just as it is beyond the Arendtian problem of truth in the public realm.

Key words: critical ontology, philosophical ethos, philosopher, ontologist, Foucault, Heidegger, Arendt.

FOUCAULT'NUN ELEŞTİREL ONTOLOJİ KAVRAMI ÜZERİNE DÜŞÜNCELER

ÖZET

Bu makale, Michel Foucault'nun eleştirel ontoloji kavramı üzerinde yoğunlaşmaktadır. Martin Heidegger ve Hannah Arendt kaynaklı sorularla karşı karşıya getirilerek, eleştirel ontoloji kavramının teorik kıymeti vurgulanmaktadır. Foucault'da eleştirel ontoloji öncelikle bir "felsefi ethos" ve "felsefi tutum"dur. Bu bağlamda Heidegger'in düşünme ve dünyada varolma sorunsalıyla birlikte irdelenmektedir. Diğer yandan eleştirel ontoloji, bir felsefi yaşamdır. Bu felsefi yaşamın niteliği ile Arendt'te insanların dünyasında filozofun yaşantısı problemi bir arada ele alınmaktadır. Makale, eleştirel ontolojinin Heidegger'de "meditatif düşünme"ye yönelişi, Arendt'te ise kamusal alanda "doğru" kavramının yarattığı problemleri aştığını özetleyerek biter.

Anahtar kelimeler: eleştirel ontoloji, felsefi ethos, filozof, ontolog, Foucault, Heidegger, Arendt.

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This article examines Michel Foucault's concept of critical ontology with reference to Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt. It is not the novelty or originality, but the conceptual purchase of critical ontology that is under question here. Accordingly, first I will flesh out the meaning attached to the concept by Foucault. This is necessarily a more descriptive endeavor limited to positing the meaning of critical ontology with textual references. Then I will proceed to discuss the "philosophical ethos" that Foucault attached to critical ontology. His use of "ethos" as a "manner of being" brings out the question of critical ontology as a new manner of being. Is Foucault's call for a critical ontology at the same time a call for a new "autochthony" or rootedness? This question will bring about a nexus of understanding on the content of critical ontology that connects as well as differentiates Foucault from Martin Heidegger, who is considered to be one of the greatest theoreticians of a new thinking, a new being, a new "autochthony" in the world. Finally, I will reflect on the predicament of critical ontologists themselves, who must, in Foucault's words, lead a "philosophical life." However, any philosophical life in the public realm is potentially problematic according to Hannah Arendt. Thus, an appraisal based on Arendt will help to illuminate whether the philosophical lives of critical ontologists are immune to the plight of philosophers in the public realm. Briefly put, I shall reflect on critical ontology as a "philosophical ethos" and as a "philosophical life" in the public realm. Both the content and the agent of critical ontology will be discussed. Engaged in this undertaking, it will be possible to understand to what extent Foucault's use of the concept of critical ontology tackles the questions posed by Heidegger and Arendt. Methodologically speaking, I will mostly focus on primary sources from a hermeneutic perspective, which will at times evoke imagined dialogues between thinkers based on textual evidence.

THE CONCEPT: A CRITICAL ONTOLOGY OF OURSELVES

Michel Foucault did not write a specific piece exclusively on critical ontology. However, he described what he had been doing throughout several of his works as a "historical ontology of ourselves" and "critical ontology." In one of his latest works, "What is Enlightenment?" (Foucault, 1984a), he used these concepts interchangeably. In 1983, in an interview with Paul Rabinow and Hubert Dreyfus, Foucault identified a common thread interwoven in his major works. He divided his studies into three instances, "domains" or "axes" of genealogy (Foucault, 1984b: 351-2). He described this thread as a "historical ontology of ourselves." *The Birth of the Clinic* and *The Order of Things* constituted an axis of study where the historical ontology focused on the constitution of ourselves "as subjects of knowledge." This was a focus on the axis of truth. The axis of power was explored in *Discipline and Punish*, where the historical ontology revealed how we constitute ourselves "as subjects acting on others." And last, *The History of Sexuality* was a genealogical study on the axis of ethics where Foucault delved into the historical ontology to uncover how we constitute ourselves "as moral agents." He added that *Madness and Civilization* had elements from all three axes (Foucault, 1984b: 351-2). By his own admission then, Foucault does not conceive historical ontology as a peripheral concept (also see Hoy, 1996: 2-3). In fact, it is just the opposite. However, we still need a better sense of what Foucault means by the concept.

A more explicit depiction of this ontology can be found in a short essay entitled "What Is Enlightenment?" Characteristically averse to sweeping theories and petrified definitions, Foucault refers to a "historical ontology of ourselves" which involves a "critique of what we are saying, thinking and doing" (Foucault, 1984a: 45). It also involves a critique of "what we are" (Foucault,

1984a: 46). In other words, this ontology is bound inseparably with criticism. While not transcendental, this criticism is "genealogical in its design and archaeological in its method" (Foucault, 1984a: 45). The archaeological method entails an effort to seek out "instances of discourse that articulate what we think, say, and do" (Foucault, 1984a: 45). The genealogical approach works in order to "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" (Foucault, 1984a).[1] In Foucault's understanding, then, genealogy serves as a source of critique. The critique, however, is not intended to generate lasting effects or large-scale fundamental transformations. In "The Subject and Power," he clearly expresses his emphasis on the minor, albeit important, possibilities of change once one adopts historical *qua* critical ontology: "Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are" (Foucault, 2002a: 336). The critical is embedded within the historical and vice versa. Perhaps this is the reason that Foucault did not pay special attention to distinguishing the concept of historical ontology from that of critical ontology in "What is Enlightenment?" (cf. Brown, 1998: 39-40).

Critical ontology is not "a theory, a doctrine." Nor is it a "permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating." Having thus negated the grand theory character of critical ontology, Foucault immediately continues to depict it as "an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them" (Foucault, 1984a: 50).

Dreyfus and Rabinow (1996), Brown (1998), and Hoy (1998) more or less discuss the general attraction of genealogy and ontology for Foucault. However, this characterization begs a specific appraisal of the attitude, the ethos, the philosophical life about which Foucault is talking. The theoretical purchase of critical ontology does not lie in its defiant character in the face of grand theories. Rather, it lies in Foucault's ability to pose the concept in a particular combination of an attitude and an ethos within a philosophical life such that critical ontology can overcome two major problems without becoming a grand theory. The first problem is the one that is inspired by Martin Heidegger. As far as it requires the adoption of a new attitude, a new ethos, is critical ontology circumscribed by what Heidegger dubs a new "autochthony," a new dwelling, a new being in the world? The other problem is in turn inspired by Hannah Arendt. As long as a critical ontologist is supposed to lead a philosophical life, is he/she immune from the disastrous encounter between the philosopher and the public realm? The following is an intellectual engagement with these questions.

CRITICAL ONTOLOGY AND HEIDEGGER: BEYOND A NEW AUTOCHTHONY

I am not interested primarily in establishing Heidegger's influence on Foucault's conception of ontology. The issue on which I focus calls up the name of Heidegger because of Foucault's particular understanding of "ethos." Foucault describes critical ontology as an "ethos." In an interview in 1983, he professes to understand "ethos" as "a manner of being" (Foucault, 1984c: 377). In that interview, he explicitly distinguishes between "ethics" and "ethos." The former for him is "a practice," while the latter is "a manner of being" (Foucault, 1984c: 377). David Couzens Hoy (1998) correctly leads our attention to the meaning given to "ethos" by Foucault which is actually ancient Greek:

> Ethos was the deportment and the way to behave. It was the subject's
> mode of being and a certain manner of acting visible to others. One's ethos
> was seen by his deeds, by his bearing, by his gait, by the poise he reacts
> to events etc. (...) Foucault thus thinks of the ethos as personal but not as
> private. The ethos is publicly observable. (Hoy, 1998: 20)[2]

Then the ethos involved in critical ontology is an outwardly visible manner of being (cf. Foucault, 1984c: 374). Foucault's understanding of ethos as a visible manner of being is better clarified in conjunction with Heidegger's interpretation of the ancient Greek conception of ethos. In "Letter on Humanism," Heidegger recites Heraclitus' Fragment no. 119: "ēthos anthrōpoi daimōn," "usually translated as 'a man's character is his daimon.'" He finds the translation weak and adds: "Ēthos means abode, dwelling place. The word names the open region in which man dwells" (Heidegger, 1993: 256). In fact, this is closer to how Foucault understands ethos within critical ontology. Ethos is a different "manner of being" in that critical ontology bestows a person with "an open region." In Heidegger's rendering, Heraclitus' Fragment no. 119 reads as follows: "The (familiar) abode for man is the open region for the presencing of god (the unfamiliar one)" (Heidegger, 1993: 258).

The presencing of the unfamiliar is welcome for Foucault as well. Experimenting with the possibility of going beyond the contingency that made us what we are is the critical aspect of critical ontology. It will serve freedom. However, Foucault carefully employs the phrase "the undefined work of freedom" (Foucault, 1984a: 46). The work of freedom is "undefined" for critical ontology in the sense that it is open to possibilities, to unfamiliar new beginnings. His intentional avoidance of certainty is therefore in line with the ancient Greek sense of ethos. Ethos in this sense requires an attitude of openness. Being in the "open region" is to dwell in openness such that one's choices are not limited to dichotomies such as "being for or against Enlightenment." The "open region" is not to be filled with predetermined *weltanschauung*, either. Nor is it populated with the "overall programs of another society, another way of thinking, another vision of the world" (Foucault, 1984a: 46). That is why Foucault refers to "possibilities," "contingencies," or "experiments" without any expectation of grand results. The adoption of open-endedness as an attitude then is a major characteristic of critical ontology.

In fact, Foucault does not seem to be asking for more than what Heidegger described as a "preparatory" thinking, "a new thinking." In his famous lecture, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," Heidegger said:

> The thinking in question remains slight because its task is only of a
> preparatory, not of a founding character. It is content with awakening a
> readiness in man for a possibility whose contour remains obscure, whose
> coming remains uncertain. (Heidegger, 1972: 60)

Foucault's critical ontology looks quite similar to this "new thinking" The emphasis on a positive uncertainty is common to both thinkers. Heidegger announces the new thinking as "a thinking which can be neither metaphysics nor science" (Heidegger, 1972: 59), just as Foucault delineates the nature of his ontology as follows: "It is not seeking to make possible a metaphysics that has finally become a science" (Foucault, 1984a: 46). These parallels between the two raise new questions.

For Heidegger, the new thinking is a "meditative" one, as referred to clearly in his "Memorial Address" (Heidegger, 1969a: 53). This is a new thinking which has "no result," "no effect" (Heidegger, 1993: 259). It does not produce "usable practical wisdom" (Heidegger, 1968: 159). In the end, it is "an inconsequential accomplishment" (Heidegger, 1993: 262). Moreover, this new thinking is part of a renewed effort for human beings to resume "rootedness" or "autochthony" in the world. Heidegger believes that so long as man exists without thinking, the "forces of technology" — actually "*Gestell*" or "enframing"— will encircle humans and reduce their thinking to mere calculation (Heidegger, 1977: 21-3; 1969a: 50-1). Is this also true for Foucault? Foucault seems to allow a new thinking only in so far as it is not an "overall program" of "another way of thinking" (Foucault, 1984a: 46; cf. Hindess, 1998: 54-5). Heidegger's call for a new thinking cannot be rendered as an "overall program." Hence, how would Foucault respond to "another way of thinking" which is not part of an "overall program"? The parallels with Heidegger lend legitimacy to such questions, the answers of which would bring back the discussion on ethos.

Granted that Foucault shares the open-endedness and uncertainty of new thinking with Heidegger; however, critical ontology cannot be reduced to a new thinking. In so far as ethos means a "manner of being " for critical ontology, one who adopts it always will be wary of what made us what we are, what we say, what we do, and what we think. A new thinking is just one among many other endeavors of critical ontology. Besides, the effort (or at least the experiment) to go beyond our limits is not limited to what we think. It also includes a potential for a change in what we are, what we say, and perhaps more importantly, what we do (Foucault, 1984a: 46, 50). Foucault does not give up the action dimension involved in critical ontology. Nor does he follow the direction in which Heidegger is headed. Heidegger takes a more inactive, even reclusive turn, when he further theorizes the new meditative thinking. The attitude of a meditative thinker is in the neighborhood of a "releasement toward things" (*gelassenheit*), which involves a conscious effort to curb "willing" and an "openness to mystery," which in turn involves a "waiting" (Heidegger, 1969a: 54-55; 1969b: 60-1, 89). Released from the chains of "calculative thinking" meditative thinkers would then be able to dwell differently in the world. They would thus achieve a new rootedness, a new "autochthony."

As far as a new autochthony is concerned, we should recall that Foucault's critical ontology does offer a new manner of being. However, Foucault does not characterize it as a whole new being, an entirely different rootedness in the world. Besides, he does not wish to get rid of purposiveness entirely. Critical ontology is not just an inactive waiting in *gelassenheit*. Nor is it an isolated thinking experiment. Its experimental character requires a determination to try to go beyond the limits of what we are. The manner of being, the ethos involved in critical ontology, is thus a "deportment" to keep experimenting –for the possibility of change in what we are always persists. In Heidegger, the attempt to dwell differently in the world takes one's path closer to "dwelling in the truth of Being" (Heidegger, 1993: 223). The important point here is that all efforts in that direction seem to promise the same consequence, "dwelling in the truth of Being." For Foucault, however, the promises of critical ontology are not singular. If successful, the experiment to go beyond our limits is likely to produce different, unpredictable, and in any case multiple results. There will be different dwellings in the world, and not necessarily all of them in the "truth of Being."

In addition, we must press the point further regarding purposiveness. As an attitude and an ethos one can engage in critical ontology if that is what one intends. Foucault allows it, provided that one can

put a distance between oneself and totalizing theories as well as master plans for the future. In other words, the ethos involved in this ontology can be adopted practically in an informed intentional fashion. Nonetheless, Heidegger's new thinking is extremely demanding, so much so that "only a few" can walk the path toward the truth of Being, *aletheia*: "The path to [*aletheia*] is distinguished from the street on which the opinions of mortals must wander around" (Heidegger, 1972: 68). This path requires "involvement with thought." Yet this is, according to Heidegger, "in itself a rare thing, reserved for few people" (Heidegger, 1968: 126). This fateful elitism does not exist in Foucault.

Reflections on the content of critical ontology so far have revolved around Foucault's depiction of it as an ethos, thus a "manner of being." Despite initial intriguing parallels, I have tried to demonstrate how Foucault's conception can diverge from the path of Heidegger that privileges as well as commends only those efforts that are oriented to dwell closer to the "truth of Being." Now is the time to make an appraisal regarding the agent of critical ontology: The critical ontologist, who is supposed to lead an active "philosophical life," according to Foucault (Foucault, 1984a: 50). A "philosophical ethos" that is open to uncertainty and oriented to change corresponds to a "philosophical life" in Foucault's account. This means we can consider critical ontologists as people who lead philosophical lives in the public realm in the presence of others. At this junction it is salutary to recall Hannah Arendt's warning that the philosophical life and the public realm make an explosive couple. In the following, I will discuss if and how Foucault's critical ontologists could survive the challenges of the public realm as posed by Arendt.

CRITICAL ONTOLOGY AND ARENDT:
A SUCCESSFUL PHILOSOPHICAL LIFE IN THE PUBLIC REALM?

In a 1978 interview, Foucault said he did not consider himself a philosopher and added that "what I do is neither a way of doing philosophy nor a way of discouraging others from doing philosophy" (Foucault, 2002b: 240-1). Why does he then cast critical ontologists as actors who lead philosophical lives? By his own admission, what matters is not the profession or institutional title of philosophy, but the specific task of philosophy "as a critical analysis of our world." As long as "the problem of the present time, and of what we are, in this very moment" remains a crucial problem, the philosophical in Foucault's rendering remains the most relevant field to understand and tackle that problem (Foucault, 2002a: 336). Foucault thus endorses "philosophical life" as a way to achieve "very specific transformations" in our "being and thinking"; in our "relations to authority" (Foucault, 1984a: 47). Unavoidably, these transformations have to take place in a political setting, for any change in our "relations to authority" is a political change after all. Hence the ontologists have to cast a critical eye at the present configuration of the public realm if they are to decipher the possibilities of transformation therein. And in order to achieve anything, the "philosophical life" of the critical ontologists has to be relevant to politics. However, Hannah Arendt would not recommend that.

To Arendt, injunctions of philosophy into politics always have brought undesirable consequences because the realms of philosophy and politics are essentially different. The essential realm of the philosopher is *vita contemplativa* (as opposed to *vita activa* marked by labor, work and action). The contemplating philosopher engages in truth, the revelation of which requires "complete human stillness," "speechlessness," and "outward inactivity" (Arendt, 1989: 15, 291). This is the complete opposite of the plurality of activities in the *vita activa*, which is also the realm of "*doxa*" or opinion

(see Arendt, 1990a: 94). The problem starts when, according to Arendt, the philosopher yields to a professional temptation to apply the truth he[3] has contemplated in his singularity to the public realm. This attempt has the potential to destroy *doxa*, the multiplicity of opinions, due to the perceived unchanging nature of philosophical truth. Debate, which is an unavoidable characteristic of the public realm, faces the threat of being eliminated if philosophical truth becomes the sole standard in that realm (Arendt, 1990a: 90-1; Arendt, 1993: 241). Whenever this encounter takes place, however, it results in a failure for the philosopher: "If the philosopher nevertheless wishes his truth to prevail over opinions of the multitude, he will suffer defeat" (Arendt, 1993: 246). Socrates, for instance, wanted to make philosophy relevant for the Greek polis, but failed miserably (Arendt, 1990a: 91). Likewise, Heidegger suffered a "*déformation professionnelle*," collaborated with the Nazis, failed, and went back to his own "abode" (Arendt, 1990b: 216). The public realm, the city in all its plurality of life and opinions, was not an appropriate ground to apply "philosophical truth" as a "standard" in human affairs (Arendt, 1993: 237). Since the trial and execution of Socrates, philosophers thus usually stayed away from the public realm. Would the philosophical lives of critical ontologists lead them to suffer the same fate?

Foucault seems to have taken the necessary precautions to go beyond the squeeze of choice between suffering a defeat or a self-condemnation to reclusiveness in averting a defeat. To put it bluntly, the "philosophical life" of a critical ontologist does not exactly resemble the *vita contemplativa* that Arendt describes. Besides, nowhere does Foucault say that the ontologist must remain aloof from human affairs. Nor does he recommend the speechless inactivity of the contemplation of truth. In discussing these points, it is better not to overlook Arendt's distinction between the philosopher of antiquity and that of the modern age. For Arendt, the philosopher of antiquity is someone who is, paradoxically, engaging in inactivity so that the truth can reveal itself. Foucault's ontologist is by no means looking for truth, be it philosophical or eternal. True, the ontologist should lead a "philosophical life" and adopt a "philosophical attitude." However, this does not require him/her either to remain inactive or to contemplate at some absolute truth. Conversely, the ontologist should be very active, constantly but patiently laboring in diverse genealogical investigations. The "patient labour" (Foucault, 1984a: 50) of the ontologist signifies a determined persistence in this philosophical attitude of critique, not an inactive waiting in the neighborhood of truth. Yet there is a flip side to that coin. The critique of what we are, how we think, what we do, and what we say does have an element of *thaumadzein*. *Thaumadzein*, in Arendt's account, is the experience of the ancient philosopher, "the wonder at that which is as it is" (Arendt, 1990a: 97). It will be noticed that Foucault grammatically casts the questions of what we are and the others in the present tense. This has to do with his understanding of the ontologist's "philosophical attitude" as a "mode of relating to contemporary reality" (Foucault, 1984a: 39).

The critique of what we are obviously requires a recognition that what we are in our contemporary reality is open to question and questioning. The ontologists must then first "wonder" at that which presently exists as it is (cf. Arendt, 1990a: 97). Otherwise they cannot begin inquiry and critique. However, this "wonder" necessary for the ontologists is not a contemplation, nor need it be. Besides, unlike the philosopher of antiquity, the ontologist's "wonder" does not consummate in beholding the truth in speechless inactivity. Rather, this wonder immediately ignites the ontologist and becomes a critical determination to experiment with the possibility of change. In brief, Foucault's ontologist can overcome the potential plight of Arendt's philosopher of antiquity mainly because he/she does not deal with the category of absolute truth.

As far as the modern age is concerned, Arendt says that the modern philosopher now has turned away even from contemplating "eternal truth" (Arendt, 1989: 293). In this sense, the distance between the modern philosopher and the critical ontologist, who has never been a contemplator, is a only a little bit shorter. The modern philosopher comes closer to the ontologist for there is no longer an "eternal truth" for the philosopher to contemplate in the modern age. After Galileo and Descartes, the philosopher realized that "neither truth nor reality is given," "neither of them appears as it is" (Arendt, 1989, 274). In this regard, the ontologist does bear some resemblance to the philosopher for neither of them now assumes the givenness of reality. Nevertheless, the philosopher's turning away from the public realm persists in the modern age. So does his inactivity (Arendt, 1989: 303-4). The ontologists, in contrast, do not follow this path and do not "withdraw into themselves" (Arendt, 1989: 291, 293). They should engage in activity such that they act and speak about what we are. From an Arendtian perspective, they must be *homo faber*; they must "reify" their action, speech, and thought into reports, articles, books (Arendt, 1989: 95). They fabricate as *homo faber* does. Insofar as they act, at the same time they "begin," "take an initiative" (Arendt, 1989: 177). Actually, Foucault himself characterizes the activity of critical ontology as a perpetual "position of beginning." The critical ontologist never attempts "acceding a point of view" which could be some sort of "key" to understanding and transcending all of the limits imposed on us. He says that "we are always in the position of beginning again" (Foucault, 1984a: 47). Let us not forget Arendt's emphasis on the Greek etymology of "action" as "*archein*," meaning "to begin" (Arendt, 1989: 177). Hence, it makes more sense to see why the critical ontologists are always in a position of beginning: Archaeology, which is the method of critical ontology for Foucault, is in the end *archein*+logos. In other words, it means a gathering of beginning and knowledge.

This condition of perpetual beginning helps remove the plight of "meaninglessness," which is characteristic of the work process of *homo faber*. For Arendt, the product becomes one object among others once produced by *homo faber*. It loses its specificity hence meaning. It is added to the long chain of products, which are the consequences of work engendered through means-ends considerations (Arendt, 1989: 155). Meaning has no place in this unavoidable condition of *homo faber*. Despite displaying some characteristics of *homo faber*, Foucault's critical ontologist, in turn, is not vulnerable to this plight. The critical ontologists can transcend the meaning problem as posed by Arendt. They can reveal, for instance, the plurality of meanings attached to "madness" and "sanity" across the ages and different historical contingencies. They will come up with meanings in plural, and not a permanent or fixed meaning in its singularity. So long as their "philosophical attitude" keeps them away from the search for a fixed meaning, they will be immune to the problem of meaninglessness.

The critical ontologists will take up the "philosophical attitude" of pondering limits in the name of a critical engagement, a critique of what we are. Foucault avoids posing the object of the critique as who we are. To him, what we are is more crucial to understand than the question of who we are. He interprets the question of "who am I" as a Cartesian question, which necessarily springs up an "I," that is a "unique but universal and unhistorical subject" (Foucault, 2002a: 335). To Foucault, Kant's questioning of "what" in his answer to "What is Enlightenment?" gives us a more important clue for understanding not the universal and unhistorical subject, but "us and our present" (Foucault, 2002a: 335). Foucault thus clarifies his preference of analyzing the question of what we are over that of who we are.

Arendt, however, pays specific attention to the distinction and she leans more toward the question of who we are. How does then Foucault uphold this critical ontology which is not interested in the question of who we are? For Arendt, action and speech implicitly reveal who we are, whereas what we are is all-visible in our "qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings" (Arendt, 1989: 178-9). While what we are therefore is quite evident for Arendt, it is just the opposite for Foucault. The revelation of what we are requires patient, laborious genealogical studies conducted using archaeological methods. He wants to reveal the discourses which condition what we do (action) and what we say (speech) (Foucault, 1984a: 46). For Arendt, however, it is not the conditioning of our action and speech but action and speech themselves that are to reveal who we are (Arendt, 1989: 179). In other words, Arendt is more interested in speech and action themselves as they take place at present in the public realm. For Foucault, understanding the conditioning of what we do and what we say is necessarily historical in orientation. This overcomes the tendency of understanding speech and action as if they all have to do with the present and very little to do with the past.

Pulling all of the threads together, it appears that Foucault's critical ontologists can survive in the public realm despite leading a "philosophical life." Their success depends upon their determination to avoid dealing with categories of truth, which is considered as the essential interest of philosophers by Arendt. Once the conditioning of what we are is understood historically, once the truth claims are dropped there can be no temptation to apply it as a "standard to be imposed on human affairs" (Arendt, 1993: 237). The danger that Arendt talks about in the following quote thus has no chance to materialize: "From the viewpoint of politics, truth has a despotic character...It peremptorily claims to be acknowledged and precludes debate, and debate constitutes the essence of political life" (Arendt, 1993: 241).

From an Arendtian perspective, then, critical ontologists can indeed render a great service in the public realm: They can keep truth away from the realm of human affairs. In doing so, they can keep debate, "the essence of political life," alive. In addition to the regular work of revealing multiple meanings of what we are, the work of critical ontologists will therefore have another meaning. Despite bearing some resemblance to Arendt's *homo faber,* who is fated to suffer from meaninglessness in the world, the critical ontologists can help keep the realm of human affairs from being overtaken by the authoritarian voice of the fixed truth.

CONCLUSION

In this article, the effort to understand Foucault's concept of critical ontology is couched in a way that is not limited to Foucault himself. The conceptual purchase of the concept emerges more poignantly when it is pitted against Heidegger's and Arendt's categories. Despite the challenges posed by Heideggerian and Arendtian questions, Foucault's concept remains afloat. Foucault's avoidance of truth as an aspired category keeps him safely away from reducing critical ontology to a Heideggerian project of a new, "meditative" thinking. Such an abstention also protects the work of critical ontologists from being rendered irrelevant or superfluous for actual life. The positive uncertainty and open-endedness which defines the character of the ontologists' work helps keep Arendt's premonitions at bay. In other words, the "philosophical ethos" of the critical ontologists do not allow the silencing of the realm of human affairs by the despotism of the truth. Therefore the new attitude,

the new ethos, the new "manner of being" of the critical ontologists is not that of meditating thinkers whose indifference to human affairs was personified in the attitude of a cherishable waiting in Heidegger. This new "manner of being" is geared toward revealing the conditioning of what we are, what we do, how we think, and what we say. The "philosophical life" based on such an ethos is dedicated to not only revealing, but also experimenting with the possibility to overcome the limits of what we are. This is a "philosophical life" that survives well in the realm of human affairs without becoming a philosophical life devoted to attaining a "new autochthony" closer to the truth of Being.

NOTES

1.　In a 1978 interview with D. Trombadori, Foucault similarly said, "My problem is to construct myself, and to invite others to share an experience of what we are, not only our past but also our present, an experience of our modernity in such a way that we might come out of it transformed" (Foucault, 2002b: 242).

2. Hoy quotes from an interview with Foucault dated 20 January 1984 (Hoy, 1998:20).

3. Arendt herself uses the male article.

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