

The Question of Culture: Giulio Preti's 1972 Debate with Michel Foucault Revisited

*Ian Hacking*¹

I am honoured, and touched, to be chosen to share the Giulio Preti Prize for 2008. The creation of the prize is also a fit way to remember a distinguished colleague at the University of Florence. I had never heard of Preti before I was told about the prize. This is the common condition among non-Italian philosophers. Google gives only 1800 "hits" for his name in English. More surprising, there are only 440 in French – despite the translated volume of his essays selected by Luca M. Scarantino (Preti, 2002). There are fewer than 200 hits in German. Indeed there are only about 10,000 in Italian. This despite the commemorative volume of essays produced thirty years after his death. Alberto Peruzzi and his colleagues are of course trying to correct this situation.

1. Preti and Foucault in 1972

Paolo Parrini knows the work of Giulio Preti well; I am not so privileged. Hence I have chosen to say a few words about a single short text by him, a debate with Michel Foucault. It took place in 1972, the year of Preti's untimely death. Preti, the older man by 15 years, was formed in the 1940s; Foucault, in the late 1950s. Much of Foucault's most influential work was to come. Preti's major work, *Praxis ed empirismo*, was published in 1957.

I nevertheless choose Preti's discussion with Foucault because my own philosophical thinking has been deeply influenced by Michel Foucault. I wrote my first explicit reflection on Foucault, a review of *L'Archéologie du Savoir*, in that same year, 1972. Around that time I began to give lectures on Foucault at Cambridge University. I was a brash young man. A colleague said to a visitor, 'If you wonder why all those books of Foucault's are in the bookshop windows in this town, you have to blame

Copyright © ICPHS 2009

SAGE: Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore, <http://dio.sagepub.com>

DOI: 10.1177/0392192109355530

it all on Hacking.' That was *such* a long time ago! Now Foucault is in every serious bookshop in the world.

Let us situate Foucault in 1972. *Les Mots et les choses* appeared in 1966. In March 1969, *Archéologie du savoir*. He began his lectures and seminars at the Collège de France in December 1970. The first course, in early 1971, was '*La volonté de savoir*' in which Aristotle meets Nietzsche. His parallel seminar series was about penal psychiatry. The years leading up to 1972 were years of intense politico-intellectual activity, and in particular, prison activism and the writing of *Surveiller et punir*. That book was published in 1975.

2. The debate-interview

The discussion between the two men was published as *Un dibattito Foucault-Preli* (in *Il Bimestre*, the issue for September–December 1972). I have been using what I think is the original French text, published for the first time in Foucault's *Dits et Ecrits*.² It reads as half-debate, half-interview. Preli poses a series of questions, states or implies his own view, and Foucault responds or clarifies. They disagree about a substantial number of points, some of which seem to me no longer of interest. Some continue to matter a great deal. I can only touch on a couple of them.

The discussion provides an excellent introduction to Foucault's thought at the moment. It is only a pale reflection of Preli's. That is why it is more of an interview than a debate. It is thanks to Preli's management of the discussion that I shall have things to say about Foucault, but because Preli is so self-effacing, I have little to say about Preli.

There was a real debate between Chomsky and Foucault on Dutch television in November, 1971. Chomsky, usually regarded as a radical democrat, comes across as a prim defender of the value of the Republic, while Foucault comes across as a raving Maoist. Preli's discussion with Foucault, in contrast, is in the measured tones of academic philosophy.

I would like to begin with one observation about Foucault's responses. He has a reputation, among those who do not care for his writing, of being flamboyant but careless. Good at the grandiose turn of phrase, but bad on precision. The interview is a remarkable antidote to that mistaken idea. Time and again he will say, 'what I mean by a certain word or phrase is so and so. In that exact sense, I cannot agree with what you have said. Of course if you use the word loosely (and by implication, carelessly) then what you have said is true, but (by implication) so what?'

Let me give an example. Preli begins by noting that Foucault has said that philosophy is a 'diagnostic' activity. There is some discussion, and Preli states that a doctor speaks outside of an illness about the illness, he does not live it. This leads him to say that he speaks a metalanguage to describe a language. Why? The symptoms of an illness are signs, and hence semiotic, so the doctor is using his language to talk about a language of signs. A metalanguage is just discourse about discourse. Foucault thinks this is far too broad a notion of metalanguage. The word has become trendy, and people talk about metalanguages in connection with literary criticism, the history of science, the history of philosophy. We should, he says, return to the rigorous defini-

tion. A metalanguage 'is a discourse by means of which the elements and rules of construction of a language are defined'. That is exactly what a logician of the analytic school would say – what I would say, in the days when I did formal logic.

Much the same thing happens with Preti's next question: 'When I reflect on culture, is my discourse in the interior of an *épistémé* or outside it?' (He has been barred from asking whether my discourse is a metalanguage about an *épistémé* or not.) So Foucault asks, what he means by an *épistémé* – 'Just what you mean by it' – 'I'd like to know what that is.' Preti answers: 'According to me, as a good neo-Kantian, I am referring to the categories''

Foucault retorts that in *Les Mots et les choses* he was at pains to insist that *épistémé* had nothing to do with Kantian categories. Preti says that for example he is willing to call historicity a category of 19th century culture. Foucault says OK, if that is how you want to use the word, but that is totally different from Kant's concept of a category. By implication: if you are going to use the word 'category' let us be rigorously Kantian about it.

Am I then siding with Foucault? So far, only in his insistence on rigorous use of terminology. Let us be strict if we use abstract nouns, such as 'category' or 'metalanguage'. Many people would say that throughout his career, Preti was on the side of careful analysis, and even of a modified scientific positivism, while Foucault was on the side of the allegedly French vices of obscurantism and high-flown language. In this discussion, the situation is almost exactly the reverse.

3. Traits of Preti's and Foucault's thought

There is a more general point here, exposed in another of Preti's questions, on a quite different subject. 'Which Nietzsche do you like?' Reply: 'Not *Zarathustra*, but rather *The Birth of Tragedy* and *The Genealogy of Morals*.' Preti: 'The Nietzsche of Origins?'

At this point Foucault makes an absolute contrast between Nietzsche and many great Western thinkers such as Husserl and Heidegger. In the quest for foundations, they go back to historical origins. Nietzsche tried 'to put in question the fundamental concepts of knowledge, morality and metaphysics, having recourse to a discourse of a positivist type, without ever referring to origins'. Foucault's Nietzsche was the positivist Nietzsche. This may be a perfect confirmation of an observation in Paul Veyne's recent book, *Foucault*. Veyne was a younger colleague of Foucault's at the Collège de France, a historian of Roman civilization. They knew each other well. Foucault called him an 'honorary homosexual'. Veyne says that contrary to what Foucault himself sometimes said, Foucault hardly ever read a word of Heidegger, except the essay on the *Essence of Truth*. Nietzsche dominated Foucault's ways of doing philosophy for many years, and Heidegger had virtually no impact at all. Veyne overstates the case, but Veyne's Foucault is my Foucault. Ah! But there were many Foucaults!

Luca Scaratino characterizes the four main axes of Preti's thought as neo-Kantian, Husserl, logical empiricism and American pragmatism. Foucault totally rejected a fundamental feature of Husserl's enterprise, the quest for *Ursprungen*. Preti thought

it was viable. Allow me an unexpected comparison. Rudolf Carnap and the rest of the logical empiricists were always seeking foundations, while Karl Popper totally rejected any kind of foundationalism. These are not matters to defend today, but I must acknowledge that I am at one with Popper and Foucault, and hence stand apart from Carnap and Preti.

The discussion dwells at length on Foucault's theme of the death of the subject, and on the significance of Sade. Those are topics of the 1970s. The weird Marquis was trendy, and Foucault was right to say he capped the age of Enlightenment, rather than began the modern era. Foucault still thought, in 1972, that the West was undergoing a radical mutation, the end of the subject; Preti disagreed. I believe that history bears Preti out. A change did take place. We no longer think of subjects as being freestanding agents with essences. But this change was far less radical than Foucault thought; he perhaps did not see himself how much he had learned from Sartre and his own colleague, Merleau-Ponty.

4. A point for Preti

It will be well to conclude these observations with a point on which I wholly agree with Preti against Foucault. The issues are immensely complex. They are as current today as in 1972. Foucault thought that the ethical in our times hinges on questions of politics and sexuality, and that the sexual is what is fundamental. That idea was central to him in 1972, but I cannot touch on it here. Let us attend to something a little less complex.

Preti distinguishes norms that are merely matters of custom, and which vary from place to place. He calls that 'ethics'. Then there are fundamental norms, which he calls 'moral'. They are transcendental, and bear on all human beings.

Foucault totally rejects all talk of the transcendental, and any suggestion that values could be ahistorical and out of time.

Preti: 'Morality is a category of objective spirit.' Ethics is local and 'maybe even instrumental'. 'We always come back to the same issue,' Foucault replies, 'You believe in the transcendental, I do not.'

I suspect that we do not need the transcendental in any strict Kantian or neo-Kantian understanding of that idea. Preti insists that although morality's strongest claim is on relations between individuals, it does not logically depend on society.

'Robinson Crusoe, on his desert island, has no ethical problems.' That is, he need not care at all about custom and social norms. But, Preti continues, 'he still has a morality, and, eventually, moral problems.' He has, we might say, duties to himself. Kant would have said, a duty not to kill himself in despair. He promised to bury two of his drowned shipmates. He should do so, though it would be easier to leave them for the fish to eat. Suppose that his ship was washed up with a thousand kegs of rum. He could just get drunk for the rest of his life, and it might be very tempting to do so. But he ought not to. He might be amused at setting fire to everything on the island, just to see the fireworks. That would be wrong, and not only for instrumental reasons.

I think Giulio Preti was right to insist on a morality over and above the social,

the political, and the sexual. In this respect he was the deeper thinker than Michel Foucault. Hence I feel especially honoured, today, to receive a prize in his name.

Ian Hacking
Collège de France

Notes

1. Lecture delivered on the occasion of receiving the Giulio Preti Prize, Florence, 15 November 2008.
2. Michel Foucault 'Les problèmes de la culture: Un débat Foucault-Preti', No. 109 in *Dits et écrits*. Paris: Gallimard, 4 vols, 1994, vol II 369–380; 2 vols, 2001, vol I 1237–1248. For the Italian version see the list of references, Preti (1973).

References to work by or about G. Preti

- Minazzi, F. (1984) *Giulio Preti: Bibliografia*. Milan: Angeli.
- Minazzi, F. (ed.) (1990) *Il pensiero di Giulio Preti nella cultura filosofica del Novecento*. Milan: Angeli.
- Parrini, P. (2004) *Filosofia e scienza nell'Italia del Novecento: Figure, correnti, battaglie*. Milan: Guerini.
- Parrini, P. and Scarantino, L. M. (eds) (2004) *Il pensiero filosofico di Giulio Preti*. Milan: Guerini.
- Peruzzi, A. (ed.) (1987) *Il cuore della ragione. Omaggio a Giulio Preti*. Florence: Quaderni della Antologia Vieusseux 5.
- Peruzzi, A. (ed.) (2004) *Giulio Preti filosofo europeo*. Florence: Olschki.
- Peruzzi, A. (2007) 'Beyond a Division: Giulio Preti and the Dispute between Analytic and Continental Philosophy', *Diogenes*, 54(4): 47–58.
- Preti, G. (1973) 'Un colloquio con M. Foucault', in *Umanismo e Strutturalismo*, p. 149–162. Padua: Liviana. For the French version see note 2.
- Preti, G. (1976) *Saggi Filosofici*, ed. by M. Dal Pra. Florence: La Nuova Italia, 2 voll.
- Preti, G. (2002) *Écrits philosophiques*, ed. by L. M. Scarantino, Préface par Jean Petitot. Paris: Cerf.
- Scarantino, L. M. (2003) 'Giulio Preti', *Swif: Filosofi e classici*. Online: www.swif.uniba.it/lei/filosofi/autori/preti.htm.
- Scarantino, L. M. (2004) 'Giulio Preti (Pavia 1911 – Djerba 1972): A Critical Rationalist', *Diogenes*, 51(2): 141–147.
- Scarantino, L. M. (2007) *Giulio Preti. La costruzione della filosofia come scienza sociale*. Milan: B. Mondadori.
- Scarantino, L. M. (2008) 'Persuasion, Rhetoric and Authority', *Diogenes*, 55(1): 22–36.