DE Here's a philosophical quiz question: what do sex, power, punishment, and madness have in common? Answer: they're all topics of books written by the prolific 20th century French philosopher, Michel Foucault. A theme that runs throughout Foucault's work, though, is his preoccupation with what counts as knowledge.

NW The topic we're going to focus on is Foucault and knowledge. Just before we get on to knowledge, could you say something about who Foucault was?

SJ Foucault was a French philosopher, born in Poitiers in the 1920s. He died at the age of 58 in 1984, so it wasn't a very long life. He was educated in Paris and then subsequently had an interesting career – some of it being a regular academic in France, and some of it being a cultural diplomat in Sweden and Poland. He lived for a bit in Tunisia. But when he came back to France he worked at the University of Clermont-Ferrand. He was then the person who set up the Department of Philosophy at the University of Vincennes in the late 1960s where he organized an amazing and revolutionary department of some of the greatest young philosophers of his time. And in 1970 or so, in his mid 40s, he became a Professor at the College de France. This was a pretty grand thing to become in French cultural life. And that's where he stayed, giving a series of public lectures each year (as professors there have to do), and at the same time, during the 1970s, becoming an international superstar.

NW His work covers quite a wide range, but are there common themes that emerge from it?

SJ On the face of it, his work looks incredibly diverse and not about what you would usually think of as philosophical problems. His first book is about the history of madness. He also wrote books about the history of psychology, the history of prisons and systems of punishment, and a three volume history of sexuality. So you might wonder, what on earth is going on here? And in a way it's a good question. Foucault was working this out himself and no doubt he wasn't completely clear where he was heading. But when he was asked about this trajectory, he sometimes said that there is one set of issues – one question – that concerned him: the relationship between the subject and truth. I think the key issue running through his work is fundamentally something about what it takes for us to be able to function as people who are able to be knowers – who are able to tell the truth and know we're doing that – and who are also able to be the objects of other people's knowledge.

NW This talk of subjects and objects is interesting, which is quite alien to ordinary conversation. Why does he use the term 'subject'?

SJ I think it's a matter of historical inheritance. Foucault grew up, after all, during the post-war period in France. The philosophy of the subject, something like existentialism for example, was all the rage.

NW Sartre's existentialism, for example, is often criticized for being almost ahistorical, as if the subject just exists and always has existed through time. But for Foucault, everything turns on when you happen to be alive.

SJ Yes that's absolutely right. I think he sees himself as resisting existentialism on that score, and also resisting Marxism, conceived as a theory that posits the idea of a truly human being who will emerge once the veils of ideology are torn away. Foucault came to feel that the way to approach the questions he's interested in is genealogical, and his debt to Nietzsche is enormous. Genealogy offers him an approach to understanding the subject

that’s attractive in several different ways. First, genealogy tries to unmask and discredit the idea of an essence or an origin, so that there is no essential subject. There is just the history of subjecthood – being a subject of knowledge and being the object of knowledge. With that comes a certain instability that interests Foucault very much, because for him, as for Nietzsche, it’s vital that these things change, and you have to understand *how* they change. That’s why you're right to say that the story depends on when you live and where you are. But genealogy is also a form of critique. It shows you that subjectivity is a historical phenomenon, and that our own subjectivity is contingent. It can change. And at least in the latter part of his career, Foucault views this as a liberating insight.

NW The story of genealogy is to go back into the past and see that people do things differently in certain areas. So for Foucault, that means talking for example about how madness was treated or how punishment was meted out. This is not the genealogy of looking at genetics, but of looking at how different practices evolved.

SJ Yes. And Foucault says that one of the things he likes about genealogy is that it's concerned with the details. You have to look in all sorts of odd places for the insights that you're going to pull out. Things that nobody thinks are important may turn out to be significant. Foucault therefore uses an enormously wide range of sources – archival materials, paintings, memoires and histories of this and that. He also draws on philosophical texts, but it’s important that they're just one kind of source among others and are not in any way privileged. His idea is to hit upon strange and unexpected moments of change that reveal the contingency of our own subjectivity.

NW Perhaps we could have an example of that.

SJ In his first book called 'Madness and Civilization' we get the beginnings of this approach. He's interested in the way that madness is understood as the dark side of reason and delineates three stages in the way that reason and madness are contrasted. One is the idea that madness is a form of truth – a form of insight – as in the prophet or the seer. The next is that people who are mad are lumped together with people who are criminal. They’re just excluded and put outside civil and political life. Then in the 18th century we see the beginning of the idea that criminality and madness are *not* the same – that the mad have a particular problem that is a *medical* problem – and this is the beginning of treating madness as a disease to be cured rather than just condemned. There isn’t any essence of madness. The way we understand it changes over time.

NW And that strategy of looking at how practices evolve carried on through his book *Discipline and Punish* as well.

SJ Yes, very much so. In *Discipline and Punish* a more fully worked out genealogical approach is applied to the history of punishment. The book begins with an incredibly dramatic incident of the judicial execution of a French regicide called Damiens, and a very detailed discussion of the unspeakable tortures that are visited on his body. Aside from Foucault's great eye for a literary coup, this is meant to serve as a point of contrast to the penal processes he goes on to discuss, which mainly emerged in the 18th century. Again, Foucault’s point is that forms of punishment change, and that the way they change reflects a changing knowledge of the subject. People come to be imprisoned rather than killed. But imprisonment also comes to be an incredibly complicated and detailed regime where every moment of the prisoner's life is measured, observed, and organized. The model for this regime is Bentham's idea of the Panopticon, where the prisoner is constantly under observation, and is punished if they don't stick to their regime, for instance by making their

bed at exactly the right moment in the day. The aim of the process is to get prisoners to internalize these demands, so that whether or not they're being observed (and they don't know when or whether they're being observed), they conform to the regime. They become subjects who impose a certain order on themselves. Foucault does something with this idea which (like most things he does!) is very original. He thinks of the Panopticon not just as a model for a prison, but as a general model for a range of institutions that begin to proliferate around this time. They all instill what he comes to call 'discipline'. So he studies not just prisons, but also military academies, schools, factories, and so on – and he finds that all of them develop regimes organized around observation.

NW It strikes me that he's got this fantastic eye for particular details that are fascinating in itself, but then becomes symbolic of a whole way of thinking about things.

SJ Yes. But Panopticism, as it's sometimes called, is not just a symbol. Foucault uses it to characterize what he sees as a general phenomenon – a set of practices for forming subjects. He also emphasizes that these are practices which work on the body as well as the mind. They make people who know certain things. For example, a prisoner knows how to be a docile law abiding person, the factory worker knows how to work on a production line, and so forth. But they also make bodies. For example you can recognize a soldier by his bearing. Somebody who has been properly educated knows how to write in a particular way – they know how to sit properly in order to write and so on. It's also vital to Foucault's story that emergence of the kind of discipline we've been discussing is tied to the development of social sciences – to forms of knowledge like criminology, psychology, and educational theory. These forms of knowledge underpin and are expressed in disciplines that make certain kinds of people. So all the detail is in the name of a big philosophical project, about the way that we become subjects who know certain things and who are also known about in certain ways.

NW Is there a place for freedom in all of this? It sounds as if the movement that he's describing through history is one of greater control over objects. Subjects become objects almost, to be moved around by people who may not even realize they're part of a system that is doing that.

SJ I think the answer to that is complicated, and Foucault makes it complicated partly by the way that he describes the phenomenon he's talking about. He describes disciplinary practices and the social scientific disciplines with which they're entangled as forms of power. He wants to draw attention to the fact that power (as he understands it) is not something you possess and exercise over me, but rather something that's spread through all these practices such that they partly determine what I can do and what you can do. So it can sound pretty scary and Orwellian. To add to this, there's a very pessimistic chapter at the end of *Discipline and Punish*, where Foucault seems to say that this kind of power is accumulating, and the more social scientific knowledge advances the more of it there will be. But then, we're bound to wonder, what happens to freedom? Some of Foucault's critics raised that question, and argued that he had destroyed the individual – that there is no individual freedom in his model. Foucault didn't exactly concede this objection; he always said later that the way he thought about power had been completely misunderstood. Power as he understood it is trying to modify somebody else's behavior – trying to get somebody to do something. And while power in this sense is ubiquitous, one shouldn't think of it as always bad. On the contrary, Foucault says, it can be productive. Surely there's nothing wrong with the fact that there are power relationships between lovers, or that there is very productive form of power in schools where people teach other people things they really need to know. So power isn't always bad. Power is just a condition of our

lives. The question is rather, how it circulates and how it's distributed. This is what really interests Foucault. He wants to draw a contrast between situations of domination where the circulation has got stuck, and situations in which it's more evenly distributed, or where it’s reversible.

NW But on some readings, Foucault *does* present histories of how society operates almost like a machine, and the subject becomes a cog in the machine. To resist power, then, we would presumably need some kind of conscious freedom, and not just the illusion of freedom.

SJ Absolutely. And I think it's in recognition of that point that Foucault's work takes a somewhat different turn in what turned out to be the last phase of his life. He wants to try to show how one can produce a genealogy of the subject that, instead of focusing on social practices that seem to form us from the outside, focuses on social practices through which we come to be able to function as individuals who are free in the sense that they can monitor their own knowledge and take responsibility for what they know and do. Foucault obviously doesn't want to say that there's some kind of free *self* which stands outside of this historical genealogical process. So he's going to take the same genealogical approach as before to the history of the inner aspect of the self. Take the question of what it is to be able to act freely. Not just that anything you do will count as acting freely – some of your actions may be discredited as mere madness. (Indeed, we've got lots of ways of excluding types of behaviors we don't approve of). Foucault’s general point is that we have to learn to be the kind of subjects who are capable of acting freely, as this capacity is understood. For example, you have to learn to control yourself, so that you become somebody who isn't just a wanton, and isn’t just crazy. Perhaps one of the most interesting parts of Foucault’s intellectual odyssey are his explorations of the historical practices through which people have cultivated the capacity to act freely; and here ancient Greece offers an interesting case study. Foucault describes a case discussed by Seneca, where Seneca says 'when I go to bed at night, and when my wife has finally shut up, I think over my day and ask myself whether I lived well and whether I did what I ought to do'. Greek literature is full of examples like this. Think of Marcus Aurelius in his meditations – it's all about exercising self-discipline. Foucault takes that as a cultural example of the way that social practices are necessary for us to come to be the sort of people who can act freely, and who can also be knowers, in the sense that we can be trusted to tell the truth and can take responsibility for ourselves as truth tellers.

NW But this does sound like a kind of cultural historical relativism where what you know is not objective, it's always relative to your personal circumstances, historically and culturally.

SJ Well, yes and no. I think Foucault is not terribly interested in questions like 'were the ethical beliefs held by the Greeks right?' or 'was Freud right about hysteria?' Of course he thinks you can ask these questions. But the question he wants to ask is always 'what does it take for ethics or Freud’s analysis of hysteria to count as knowledge?'

NW So it's a kind of sociology of knowledge, a kind of description rather than an evaluative judgment of whether the kind of knowledge that people are acquiring within this framework is good or bad?

SJ Again, this is complicated. Foucault says that the point of a genealogy is to initiate a sort of critique. It's not exactly a critique that tells us whether things are right or wrong. It's a critique which shows that the standards of truth, or of right and wrong, that we rely on

are contingent. That being so, we shouldn't be too glib and too confident that we understand the truth, or that our normative standards are the right ones.

NW Foucault died in 1985 – very young, as you've mentioned. Has he just been sidelined as an interesting quirk in the history of French philosophy, or is he somebody whose impact is still felt?

SJ I think his influence has been enormous and is very much present, though not always acknowledged. For one thing, there's been a big genealogical turn in contemporary philosophy, and Foucault's work is largely responsible for this. At the same time, his ideas have also shaped other debates within political philosophy – about liberty, about the status of political agreement and disagreement, and so on. Perhaps most consequential is his analysis of power. One sees its influence, for example, in the huge debate he had with Habermas, where Foucault criticized what he saw as Habermas's utopian idea of a form of communication beyond power. In addition his revolutionary take on knowledge is reflected in the ever increasing interest in the social dimensions of epistemology. Foucault's genealogical approach has also been enormously helpful within feminist philosophy. He has been criticized by some writers for not saying anything much about gender relations; and some critics have argued that his view locks women in to practices where they are dominated by men. But as I've tried to explain, I think this last criticism is misplaced. It seems to me that thinking genealogically about gender has had a liberating effect, and this owes a great deal to Foucault.