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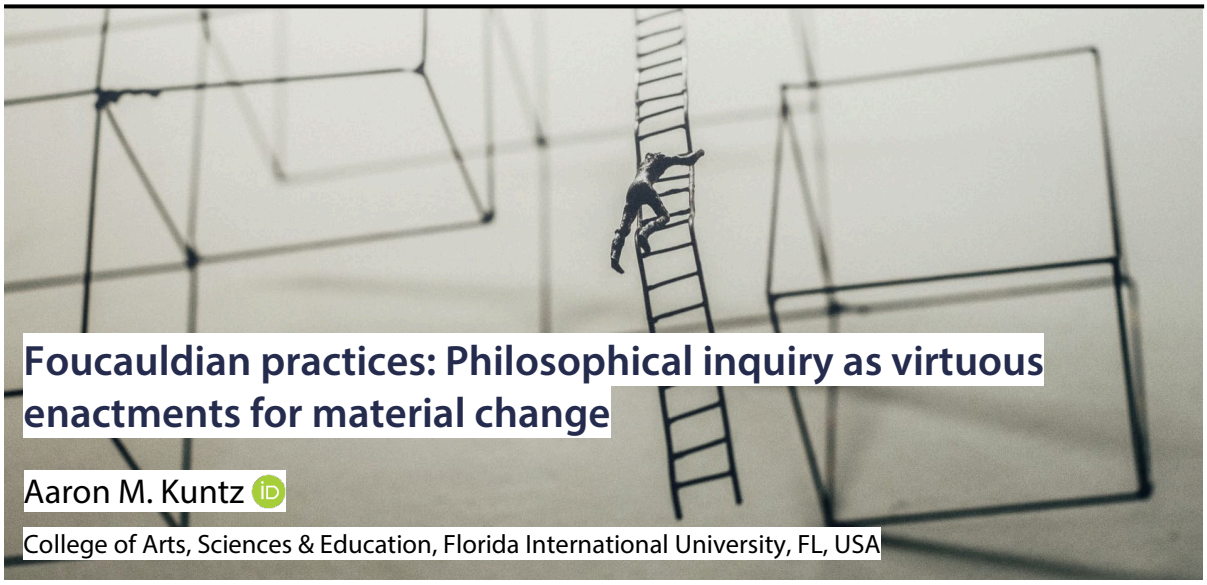

Foucauldian practices: Philosophical inquiry as virtuous enactments for material change

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(Wong, 2017)

ABSTRACT
In this article I consider philosophical inquiry as an ethical enactment for material change. I do so by situating philosophical inquiry as a type of virtuous practice, animated by an ethical determination to generate material difference. I thus place a large degree of theoretical emphasis on the Foucauldian notions of practice, virtue, and enactment as a means to recognize the open-ended, process-based orientation of such work. Through the course of this article I extend my argument to challenge conventional inquiry practices in education as a means to generate different, more immanently situated, effects.

KEYWORDS
Philosophical Inquiry; Ethics; Practices; Foucault; Virtue; Materiality; Enactment

Introduction

As an identified research methodologist, I have been motivated to understand the practiced means by which we come to know and live, given the governing rationales that imprint our contemporary moment. This comes from an ever-widening sense of what constitutes methodological work. While many of my colleagues have generated increased methodological specificity and focus over their careers, my interests seem to forever be more general. Whereas they perhaps became experts in some technique or process, I became less interested in the actual minutiae of research activity and more concerned with questions of research orientation and effects. In short, while some embraced the methods of methodology, I have come to find value in broader questions of inquiry.

This has led to a deep interest in notions of philosophical inquiry as a methodological approach (and one, unfortunately, not always embraced by the larger field of educational inquiry within my home country of the United States). As a result, my implied notion of what it means to "practice" inquiry is decidedly broader than those who define the term according to the specific method employed. As such, I often begin to interrogate educational practices through questions of ethics, foregrounding ontological considerations for living differently over and above more epistemological fixations on the means by which we acquire knowledge. This has led me, of late, to consider the implications of philosophical inquiry within education generally, and as an ethical

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practice of working for productive change more generally. As one might expect, this orientation has implications for how I practice inquiry in my own work as well as how I come to imagine graduate courses in inquiry—both on the level of classroom practices and curricular structure.

Given this, in this article I consider philosophical inquiry as an ethical enactment for material change. I do so by situating philosophical inquiry as a type of virtuous practice, animated by an ethical determination to generate material difference. I thus place a large degree of theoretical emphasis on the Foucauldian notions of *practice, virtue,* and *enactment* as a means to recognize the open-ended, process-based orientation of such work. Through the course of this article I extend my argument to challenge conventional inquiry practices in education as a means to generate different, more immanently situated, effects.

Throughout, I explicate Foucault's notion of *practices* as a useful means for philosophical inquiry to generate productive material change. Through an analysis of seemingly mundane practices within the field of educational research, I demonstrate the means by which such actions are animated by a similar adherence to the reason and values of late capitalism and assumptions regarding the inevitability of exploitative relations in our contemporary moment generally and research contexts more specifically. Further, I orient my analyses within a larger project of ethical engagement, one informed by Foucault's work on philosophical truth-telling (*parrhesia)*. I thus offer philosophical inquiry as a type of normative philosophy, simultaneously critiquing our contemporary moment and positing what *might* happen in a yet-to-be-determined future. It is in this refusal to adhere to a static, closed, or recursively-feeding life-process that philosophical inquiry enacts virtuous potential, animated by ethical claims for necessary material change.

On practices

In an interview regarding "questions of method" Foucault (1991) famously insisted that his analytical focus was not on

> 'institutions', 'theories' or 'ideology', but *practices* – with the aim of grasping the conditions which make these acceptable at a given moment; the hypothesis being that these types of practice…possess up to a point their own specific regularities, logic, strategy, self-evidence and 'reason'…practices being understood here as places where what is said and what is done, rules imposed and reasons given, the planned and the taken for granted meet and interconnect (p. 75; original emphasis).

As a critical entry point into the cultivation of a *history of the present*, practices reveal the larger social processes and rationalities that make them possible; "the conditions which make these acceptable at a given moment." Yet, through their appeal to common sense conventional practices most often remain invisible; they escape notice because they remain unquestioned, extending the norms that make them possible (thus it is that no practice is ever innocent, nor neutral and without effect). In this way, practices animate through recursive and symbiotic relations with the logics that inform them—extending from normative logics even as they generate the very rationale necessary for their enactment. Further, this logical generation confects "new" practices which often articulate as a preemptive process, intervening in imagined disruptive possibilities in order to maintain some semblance of the power-laden status quo.[1] Thus, practices are often enacted as a means to intervene within and maintain (or otherwise amplify) the status quo; a type of preemptive form of foreclosure that cuts short desires to manifest new potential. Normalized practices short-circuit potential for a future unknown and differently lived. As Massumi (2015) notes, such a relational process might be understood as a form of ontopower.

As a means of practiced critique, philosophical inquiry seeks to disrupt such normalizing processes—to make strange the practiced or familiar. Such a disruption usefully makes visible daily practices that would otherwise escape notice and become re-enacted without thought. This means of problematization is especially important in the area of educational research as it maps the effects

of methodological habit, calling for experiments with inquiry that perhaps produce different effects (those oriented and animated by the force of an ethical claim that we must become otherwise).

In short, as an element of critique, philosophical inquiry productively diagrams the relational effects of research practices as a formation of ontopower with material consequences. As a type of beginning, then, philosophical inquiry articulates cartographically, mapping more normalized daily practices and the logical structures that make them possible. Further, if we are to take practices seriously, we must recognize their animating force in multiple directions—their capacity to simultaneously effect difference and foreclose potential; their preemptive governance and liberatory challenge. We are always at risk of reproducing the very processes we seek to critique, it seems, even as we tilt on the precipice of animating transgressive potential through our inquiry work.

Yet disruption (and visibility) without an ethically-oriented position on change is not, by itself, useful to any political project. That is, intervention without ethical force (a means to orient change towards some direction, even if final destinations remain unknown) cannot compel sustainable change. Within the area of methodology, such disruption leads to charges of ethical relativism ("any and all change is fine, as long as it is change"; a critique often extended by liberalism) as well as normalized reproduction of the ethical status quo ("your vision of change is determined by the governing ethics of the day, as such, your attempts at intervention actually recreate the very system you seek to challenge"; a critique often articulated by more critical positions). Thus it is that Foucault's inquiry into practices might be usefully layered with a generative ethical stance on philosophical engagement, one revealed through his later lectures on truth-telling and virtue (Foucault, 2010; 2011). This is to work for change because we cannot continue to live in these ways, according to these forms of governance. Thus manifesting difference extends to ontological levels; a determination to be and become otherwise.

Given our contemporary moment—one of fascisms both bold and subtle—it seems increasingly important that we consider philosophical inquiry as a series of ethical enactments, events, and practices for change. Foucault's work on these issues provides a useful means through which to engage and intervene within a contemporary time rife with inequity, oppressive governmental regimes, and normalizing practices of governance; these are the conceptual-material contexts we should work to change. Philosophical inquiry extends a virtuous positioning that seeks productive disruption to exploitative norms because it is the right thing to do—ethical practices that could bring about a future unknown.

As evidenced by his own definition, Foucault's engagement with *practices* remains usefully layered. As the above block quotation indicates, Foucault renders practices as *active* (possessing and articulating reason) and *platial* (a location where normalizing discourses intersect and collude). In short, Foucauldian practices extend through formations of ontopower, what Massumi (2015) notes as a type of "constitutive power" that normalizes select ways of living even as it offers rationalized causes for the felt effects of enduring this contemporary moment. The force of ontopower entangles our daily practices with affective states and we continue to live as though we could not be (or become) otherwise. And yet, given the exploitative relations that constitute our contemporary moment, becoming otherwise takes on increased ethical urgency.

Foucault's emphasis on practices as situated at the nexus of epistemological, ontological, and ethical concerns aligns with contemporary formations of what I (Kuntz, 2015; 2019) term *relational materialism* (or, what others have termed new or post materialism/empiricism) and *posthuman theory* that have gained increased currency in educational inquiry, of late. However, though scholars have noted that such theoretical approaches produce new ethical possibilities, they are often critiqued for manifesting a space of ethical relativism, one in which every difference matters equally (see, for example, Brinkmann's 2019 critique of post-qualitative inquiry and posthuman theory). In response, I situate the analysis of Foucauldian practices as an ethically-informed means of philosophical inquiry, one generated in order to produce an oriented-future; an historically-

informed claim on what *might* happen (not prescriptive claims on what *will* happen or normalizing assertions of what *should* happen). This positioning situates philosophical inquiry as a productive and generative critique of conventional methodologies in education. As such, this theoretical orientation necessarily challenges both the simplistic separation of epistemological and ontological concerns in educational research (a vestige of our addiction to cartesian duality) *and* the enthusiastic flattening of ethical hierarchies often found in onto-epistemological formations of post-qualitative and posthuman inquiry.

An example: Consensus building

Perhaps a rather mundane example is in order. Consider the ease with which we have often learned to move towards consensus in both our analytical and pedagogical practices. Within the world of qualitative research, for example, there is much determination to develop a series of consensuses through procedures of data manipulation known as coding. Multiple textbooks abound that treat coding practices as a means to generate conventional order, to cobble together meaning through otherwise distinct elements of data. Most often, the underlying rationale that feeds these normalized practices is an inherent assumption that data consensus is meaningful and good—a goal towards which analytical practices reach. Consequently, a researcher might be encouraged to locate broad themes under which selected codes might fall and, in that consensual organization, difference is often shed in the interest of similarity (*these* codes are most alike and so should be brought into relation, under *this* category of findings). It is the movement away from difference (if confected codes are different, they must be organized into different categories) and towards sameness (these similar codes will be understood and defined together, as having the same meaning) that makes an analytical reliance on consensus reductively dangerous here. Indeed, in that practiced rush to generate findings through consensus difference is often erased, or deemed to matter not as much (in my previous work I understood such analytical means to operate upon a *logic of extraction* that made conventional forms of qualitative research decidedly anti-materialist [Kuntz, 2015]). The result is, quite literally, always more of the same. Importantly, this "more of the same" is granted an implied status of positive worth; consensus assumes an ethical value. Thus, it is that a seemingly benign practice of generating data patterns via consensus simultaneously employs a value-laden assumption that distinguishes and privileges similarity in relation to difference.

Within undergraduate and graduate seminars alike there is often a similar trend towards sameness in the usage of discussion groups as a pedagogical practice in the classroom. In such circumstance, students are often moved into small groups and asked to discuss an assigned reading. With seeming innocuous nonchalance, groups are asked to report out their discussion to the larger class, to give an overview of their insights. Almost without fail, students register this request as a call for articulations of consensus—where group discussions made the most sense and tracked towards similarity—and respond in kind. As a result, groups often revert to a type of "similarity coding" where they write down notes on what was said and configure these statements into themes of consensus (and, I find anyway, students become increasingly adept at this practice as they move through schooling and towards terminal degrees); a practice not unlike that of coding described above. Thus, difference becomes overtaken by similarity (and normalized voices drown out alternative articulations) and students become adept at fixating on consensus, perhaps even registering dissensus and difference as counterproductive to the task at hand.

Obviously, I have painted both of the above examples with rather broad strokes. And there need not be forced choices between sameness and difference—or consensus and dissensus—within research and teaching practices. Indeed, difference often animates within sameness and with quite resistive effects. At the same time, it is the normalization of these two processes, the ease with which they are practiced without question, that makes them so valuable for analysis. Further, it remains important to note that such practices, though seemingly benign or innocuous, extend a

value-based claim that privileges separation (similarity from difference) and hierarchy (similarity over difference). The effects of such work are not value-neutral or without material consequence.

Practice in context: Late capitalism

As Massumi (2015) notes, neoliberal capitalism "operates as an ontopower: it brings to be what its apparatus captures. It is a power of becoming leveraging the field of emergence of life" (p. 233). In similar fashion, research practices construct the very things they are designed to capture—manufacturing data for the purposes of interpretation and conventional forms of ordering. Thus, as we inquire into the logics and rationale that make some practices possible (and others improbable), it remains important to recognize the ordering value-structures that inform such an onto-genetic process. To my mind, this larger, value-laden context is that of late capitalism. In this vein, I am informed by Rosi Braidotti's challenge of affirmative inquiry practices that are decidedly anti-fascist. As Braidotti (2011; 2018) notes, late capitalism operates on principles of modulation, adapting to (and adopting) a host of practices that seem at first glance disconnected and diffuse. And through such modulation contemporary formations of capitalism work to confect anew and maintain the status quo. Immersed in such circumstances, we perhaps become addicted to the affective states of pre-emption, insecurity, and accumulation that extend from the force of capitalistic modulation and extension. Capitalism thus never fulfills, it merely creates accelerated options to the immediate moment; pseudo-choices to convention that continue the status quo. This force of modulation is an articulation of the ontopower of capitalism and brings a challenge to any hope for systemic change.

In response, Braidotti advocates for a position of affirmation, one that employs philosophical critique to productively contest the governing forms of capitalism that so dominate our contemporary moment. In a similar fashion, I find value in contestatory practices of philosophical inquiry, those that begin with an ethical determination to truth-tell. In this sense, Foucault's explication of *parrhesia* (truth-telling) offers a means to enact philosophical inquiry from an ethical determination to become otherwise. This is to entangle the productive practice of affirmative critique with an ethically-oriented vision of future potential. Through refusing the conventional status quo, the *parrhesiast* believes that a difference is not only possible but necessary if we are to live ethically-enacted lives. This, it seems to me, is to engage in virtuous practices that generate difference. Philosophical inquiry practices thus simultaneously critique the contemporary moment and manifest an open-ended and yet to be known potential; the not-yet that is a radical challenge to what has come to be.

In the end, I situate philosophical inquiry cartographically—mapping how historical practices uniquely manifest in contemporary contexts through an adherence to normalizing reason. Given the enormity of inequity and violence that plagues our contemporary moment, inquiry can afford neither an ethically-closed nor relativistic stance. Instead, inquiry must be positioned, or, to extend the cartographic metaphor, oriented. Foucault's use of *practices* as a valuable entry point for analysis is made all the more useful when oriented by a virtuous determination that a potential future, not bound to the rationalities of old, might come to exist. Thus, inquiry might intervene to disrupt our contemporary moment through manifesting as a type of ethical deliberation with the history of the present. This is inquiry as multiple practices of refusal and creation; virtuous challenges to what is, in order to enact what might yet become.

Note

1. In my more recent work (Kuntz 2019; 2020) I note the inevitable foreclosure involved in possibility, arguing for a more open-ended engagement with potential in order to enact transformative practices of inquiry. Such a position engages the transgressive potential of "new" formations of inquiry that break from learned habits of knowing and coming to know.

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