

The Power of Knowing:

An Analysis of Michel Foucault's Account of the Body by way of Nelson Goodman's World-Versions & Friedrich Nietzsche's Will to Power

by

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Abstract

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Michel Foucault's strict adherence to the idea of historicism proves problematic when considering the nature of the human body. To suggest that the composition of the docile body is wholly dependent upon the popular or dominant "disciplines" of the current time leaves the question of the nature of those bodies in existence prior to the docile body open for discussion. Additionally, we might ask if the docility of these bodies is reversible and, if so, could this reversal reveal a type of trans-historical "pre-docile" body? The docile body takes root in a compound of structures, beliefs, events, and individuals, all of which work together to create the phenomena of the world and our experience in it. I believe to critically analyze Foucault's genealogical interpretation of the human experience we must first address these questions and parse out the phenomena that most adequately delineates his notion of the docile body. We will see how the creation of worlds gives rise to body docility through an examination of Nelson Goodman's theory of right world-versions outlined in his work *Ways of World-Making*. The world shaping and propagating attributes of Goodman's theory closely resembles the political anatomies that create and shape Foucault's view of a docile body. The incorporation of Goodman's classifications of world-versions and the mechanisms from which they are borne bring a dialogue with Foucault's notions of discipline, punishment, and existence that are concrete and thematic in describing the nature of the world and the individuals that exist within it. While such metaphysical speech may be seen as counterintuitive to the genealogical agenda, I believe this parallel examination of Foucault's theory will further diminish the need for a trans-historical body as it relates to Foucault's views of the "body" and human existence.

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I. Power, Knowledge & World-Making

The basis for Nelson Goodman's theory of world-making is the elimination of a foundation, in particular, any notion or idea that is transcendental or unchanging in nature. For Goodman, discovering transcendental truths is not nearly as important as the recognition of "rightness" of world-versions (1978, 19). Right world-versions must provide at least one of the following: a linguistic assignment of object identifiers, an adequate division of relevant and irrelevant inductions of the perceived world, a constructional system of organizing occurrences and events, the incorporation of advancements in knowledge, or just enough exactitude to allow for slight distortions of appropriations (1978, 7-16). It is by the implementation of one, all, or some of these mechanisms that right world versions come into existence. As a function of the perspectival nature of his world-making, Goodman holds any truths to be conditional among each version, therefore rendering evaluations of over-arching, transcendental truths impossible to the quest of understanding the perceived world. Furthermore, if truth exists, its validity is measured by the rightness of one's world version. Ultimately, the rightness of a version depends upon the relevance of its contents, the revelations that spawn from its ideas and its ability to fit among other coherent world versions (1978, 19). While Goodman is speaking directly of how worlds are created through individuals' shared conceptual schema, I believe the content and mechanisms that shape these worlds share a somewhat loose yet affirming relation to Foucault's theory of the "body" in terms of the powers and political disciplines that shape it. By establishing the connection between the formative elements of Foucault's notion of the body and those of Goodman's world-versions, we will begin to see the "body" emerge as both creator and symbol of a world or reality that is only knowable through an ongoing process of symbolization.

In his work, *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault offers a detailed account of the emergence and evolution of docile bodies. He suggests that the human body takes on this docile nature or malleability when it “enters a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down, and rearranges it” (1984, 182). This machinery is the disciplinary techniques is constructed and used primarily and predominantly by specialized institutions to exercise control and dominion over their jurisdiction: the army, the hospital, the school, for example. For Foucault, this new political anatomy of discipline emerges in the eighteenth century to manage and use bodies as a means of economic and political expansion take form. These techniques, unlike their predecessors, objectify the body such that every detail of physical activity and mental process is analyzed and controlled to ensure not only obedience but also the highest level of work efficiency. Foucault characterizes the disciplinary powers that are carried out by these techniques as the kind of technologies or institutions that assume constant subjection of the body’s forces as a means to render bodies docile and create individuals that persist as both objects and instruments of those very techniques. Disciplinary power is decentralized in that there does not exist a single apex in society from which power flows, but it operates everywhere “...in a continuous way, down to the finest grain of the social body” (Foucault 1984, 80). Through various techniques including surveillance and the normalization tactics of examinations, disciplinary power itself is invisible; however, by the same token it renders individuals visible by constantly individuating, positing and arranging bodies in such a way that they are constantly seen and able to be seen.

Importantly, Foucault holds that this type of power is essentially corrective and productive. The disciplinary techniques exercised by the military, schools, and medical institutions all created this “new knowledge of man [sic]” where he or she is no longer viewed as the master of his or her own body (1984, 189). I believe it is essential to highlight Foucault’s description of this pivotal emergent movement of disciplines as the “moment when an art of the

human body was born..." (1984, 182). The art of the human body signifies the representation of one's body to a conductor, overseer, or analyst; this new body is constructed as a means to an end by some outside force and a pawn of a particular political anatomy or what Foucault describes as "docile." It is at this point that we can relate Foucault's analysis of the docile body to Goodman's discussion of world-making. The docile body represents a new knowledge of the "individual" with each emerging discipline taking part in shaping this new world-version of the "body." For, Foucault asserts that it is the thoughts, reflections, and actions imposed or coerced by these disciplines that "makes" individuals by shaping their "bodies" (1984, 188). The structural similarities that exist in Foucault's discussion of disciplinary power and Goodman's modes of world creation are further illuminated as Foucault describes the coercive nature of power:

...This power produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production. (Foucault 1984, 205)

Here we see Foucault's disciplines taking on a role in creating realities or worlds of relevant truths and objects, which similarly characterizes Goodman's account of the creation of right world-versions. Foucault's theory positions the imminent conflict of power as not only the creation of realities but also the creation of the bodies that work as instruments for the progression of these powers. As we will see in Foucault's discussion on the nature of the soul, power coupled by the punishment and constraint that results from it will prove to be elemental in the formation of the world and the nature of the bodies that inhabit it. This discussion is best explored by its juxtaposition with Gilles Deleuze's account of Friedrich Nietzsche's theory on the "will to power" which situates Foucault's creation of docile bodies as a particular expression of a power that, as Nietzsche describes, both wills and is willed.

II. The Will to Power, The Knowable & Known

Interpretations of the will to power predating Deleuze's account assign to the will a kind of desire for the acquisition of power through means of money, prestige, honor, and other qualitative values of superiority. Typically power assumed a dual nature in serving as the entity to be represented and the object of representation, itself. For instance, in the Hobbesian state of nature, man's will to power manifest itself through a desire to have his superiority both represented and recognized by others. Similarly in Hegel, conscience as a will wants to be recognized by other consciousnesses and represented as self-consciousness. For Nietzsche, each account of power is erroneous in that they make power dependent upon an actualization of values, attributes and characteristics of man and the world through perceived notions or shared beliefs held within a society (Deleuze 1962, 81). Moreover, this traditional sense of will to power inherently limits the will to seeking and aspiring to values or powers that presuppose the very existence of the will. From this, a contradiction emerges where the will merely becomes a representation of the thing it supposedly wills. Nietzsche's theory of the will to power dissolves this contradiction by illuminating one of the principle functions of the will as creator of new values rather than a reflection of established ones. His will to power does not understand the will as desiring power of any sort, but brings power to the forefront of the philosophy of the will "as the one that wills in the will" (1962, 85). Thus, it is the powers within the will that are integral to the existence of the will and are differentiated in nature. The will then comes forth as a creative entity upon itself without a dependence on pre-existing units of power that are perceived in the world. It is here that Foucault's discussion of the nature of the soul as an entity that creates the body in which it imprisons begins to take form. Nietzsche describes the will as both a liberator and prisoner to the power by which it is essentially composed. It is characterized as an element that presides over the phenomena of the organic world, so much so that it "rules even in the

inorganic world...”(1962, 63). The souls in Foucault’s introductory discussion on the political anatomies that compose the body are assigned starkly parallel attributes. Similar to the will, the genetic makeup of the soul or that from which it is born, are methods or differentiations of power. For Foucault, these differentiations of power take form as “methods of punishment, supervision, and constraint” (1984, 177). In addition, the soul serves as a noncorporeal or inorganic element in which the effects of powers are articulated, knowledge of the world is referenced, domains of knowledge are formed, and power is carried out. The conglomeration of these occurrences gives life to the body or brings the subject into existence, where the soul can now take up the body as an instrument for its own utilization as another artifice of knowledge to extend and reinforce power. This is how the body becomes an entity produced, positioned and imprisoned by political techniques similar to the disciplines that exists “permanently around, on [and] within the body by the functioning of the power or ‘soul’” that is imposed on it (1984, 177). For Nietzsche, the significance of sense and values, or the assignment of names and characteristics is derived from the will to power. Similarly, the attributes of the body, its functions, forms and purpose all derive from the differentiations of powers that reside in the soul. As the powers contained in the will become that which is the will while also bestowing sense and value to it, the soul is contained within the body and all that which is contained in the soul becomes the matter of the body. This transfiguration that occurs between the soul and body inextricably ties the body to the powers, knowledge and ultimately the relative political anatomies that construct the soul.

Moving forward, we will begin to see how manifestations of power and knowledge contained in the soul form the body as well as objects and phenomena that are perceived in the world. By refocusing on Goodman’s methods of world-making in respect to truth relativity, the elements of the soul emerge as the various forms of objects and phenomena that persist in a

constant flux of making and remaking of world-versions. Earlier I outlined how rightness of worlds are determined but to see how these worlds come into existence we can embark on a deeper exploration of how Foucault's bodies, both docile and what we might call "pre-docile," are created. One of Goodman's ways of world-making is through composition and decomposition of all the objects and subjects within the world. He asserts that "such composition or decomposition is normally effected or assisted or consolidated by the application of labels: names, predicates, gestures, pictures, etc." (Goodman 1978, 7). The assignment of terms or labels creates a world of identifiable objects that can be described and analyzed. I believe this notion of identity highlights Foucault's conception of the soul's imprisonment of the body. The mechanisms of the soul work to describe the body by assigning to it a sense (docility) and a value (utility). Much more detailed assignments might classify individuals by intellectual or physical ability. Such assignments move toward what Foucault describes as the "examination" of bodies as a means of documentation to link individuals to the "features, the measurements, the gaps, the 'marks' that characterize him and make him a "case" (1984, 204). For Goodman, the categorization of objects in the world is a way to establish relative truths and knowledge about the world. The human body is not excluded from this relativity of truth, which is relayed by Foucault in his description of the individual:

The individual is no doubt the fictitious atom of an "ideological" representation of society, but he is also a reality fabricated by this specific technology of power that I have called "discipline." (1984, 204)

The body emerges as a living tale of the discourses that determine the domains of knowledge that can be attained about the body and the knowledge that is subsequently attained. By considering Goodman's discussion of truth relativity, the body takes on a more dynamic role

serving as an instrument through which facts are fashioned exposing what we come to view as a physical world as merely a “highly artificial version of the perceptual facts” that have been fabricated (1978, 92). For, Goodman suggests that facts are fashioned by the very process that constitutes the world, such that we cannot establish any facts beyond world-versions. The kind of specifications to which Goodman alludes is captured in an example he provides on the faculty of sight. He contends that an observer that visually determines an object before him only identifies the object accurately when there is an overriding consensus confirming the perceptual truth of the object within the identified space. Moreover, the specifications of the instrument of the body or specifically its faculty of sight lie in the constructions of perceptual truths and the quest for a consensus such that the observer must be conditioned or *corrected* to use “the sort of terms, the vocabulary” to describe what he sees perceptually such that no one around him can “charge him with an error in visual perception” (Goodman 1978, 92). This mode of specificity shares a distinct resemblance to the corrective measures Foucault terms *normative judgment*. For Foucault, a *normalizing gaze* is implemented in the examinations of individuals that combine “the ceremony of power and the form of the experiment, the deployment of force and the establishment of truth” (1984, 184). In disciplinary power, norms operate as a kind of “anatomopolitics” of the body which function prescriptively as a means to refer individual’s actions or behaviors to a larger spectrum which allows for comparisons and differentiations to be made among individuals, and yet puts forth a rule or standard by which all individuals should strive to meet. Norms are located through the process of continually hierarchizing, homogenizing, excluding, and differentiating the abilities of individuals, thereby defining the nature of *the* individual and identifying the “abnormal” such that the entire disciplinary power process of creating the efficient and visible docile body is guided and “supervised” by the “perpetual penalty” of normalization. The individual observer in Goodman’s example and Foucault’s

individuals in the disciplinary society are all producers and products of the process of normation. It is within this process that truths are created and subsequently accepted; Goodman would go a step further to say that all observable artificial and natural objects or events such as a brick wall or a sunrise are created and brought into focus by normation (1978, 36). In both accounts, there is an abandonment of any notion of facts existing independent of those formed from perception and propagated as norms or as a physical reality. I believe as Foucault holds that the body does not exist outside the political techniques of the social order, Goodman would follow this sentiment in suggesting that we can not know or experience any physical or natural objects that exist outside the consensus of truth.

This brings us back to the questions of a possible pre-docile body and what can be made of a body that is perpetually created by and in the social order and yet is static enough to allow for a perceived singularity of reality and truths. In both theories, one may infer from Foucault and Goodman a sense of pre-existing constructions of the artifacts of power, truth and knowledge that are currently perceived. If the matter in which we can perceive such artifacts are structured and defined by the specific knowledges that we behold, what can be made of artifacts that were perceived in times before us? If anything, what can be said of their nature of existence and how might this knowledge further inform our current conception of such things? One of Goodman's ways of worldmaking described as "composition" illuminates a possible characteristic of the body Foucault describes that alleviates this anomaly by positing the body as an entity where "events are combined into an enduring object" (Goodman 1978, 101).

By assigning to the body the property of *enduring*, I believe we can adequately begin to address the question posed at the onset of this paper. First, it is important to note that, for Goodman, the property of permanence does not follow from endurance. An object endures only

under the circumstances in which “temporally diverse events are brought together under a proper name or identified as making up ‘an object’ or ‘a person’...” (Goodman 1978, 8) So, events, linguistic nuances, vocabulary, and object categorizations change over time or differ among various versions so that the objects formed can only endure and be perceived as permanent objects within respective world versions; it is the very diversity of world versions that bounds objects and bodies to a rule of contingency that excludes the possibility of an over-arching property of permanence. Since we’ve established that the matter of the body is composed of the political anatomy that defines the relation of powers and constructs of knowledge within any historical period, the nature of a “pre-docile” body would be identical, in form and origin, to that of the docile body in that it would be given its sense and value through discourses that are expressed by and present within its respective anatomy. Thus, the term or “proper name” *body* is merely a placeholder of the compounding knowledge that designs and defines human existence. This compounding knowledge that is formed through power and disseminated by power is parallel to what Goodman describes as the “matter of habit” that constructs the “reality in a world” (1978, 20). Moreover, the manner in which individuals move in and about the world is as much representative of a shared notion of how these movements *should* occur, as it is the capacity by which the physical body is able to perform such movements. The formation of habits is integral to the instrument of power in that, “the corrective nature of such disciplinary powers is applied through the body, time, everyday gestures and activities; the soul, too, but in so far as it is the seat of habits” (Foucault 1984, 128). The body, therefore, endures as an entity that is constantly being remade and reformed whether it is a function of disciplinary powers residing within a time of colonization or a time characterized by powers residing over individuals assigned to a machine or computer as a means of production. By briefly revisiting Foucault’s discussion on the soul and his notion of power-knowledge we will see how this framework of

power and the formation of habits is a perpetual phenomena that does not leave room for the existence of a trans-historical body or trans-historical entities as a whole.

III. The Body & Its History

In a larger context, power, for Foucault, is an element in the genealogy of the modern soul. Power produces knowledge while knowledge simultaneously acts as a tool to increase and exert power. Power-knowledge confines and defines the modern soul, a soul that, as discussed earlier, makes and dwells within the docile body. Moreover, power-knowledge itself is confined and defined by the political anatomy of modern society, which is ruled by mechanisms of punishment and control. One very poignant example Foucault presents to further cement his idea of the power contained in the soul and the paradoxical conflict bred within it is the trend of prison revolts that occurred during the mid 20th century. He suggests there is something paradoxical about the slogans, aims and modes of these revolts, in that, while these prisoners were against physical miseries such as suffocation, hunger, and physical maltreatment, they were also indirectly against protective and advancing implementations such as medical treatment and educational services. It appears that these individuals were opposed to both the discomforts and comforts provided by the prison. Foucault shows that the internal conflict faced by these prisoners is dominated by the discontent faced by their “materiality as an instrument and vector of power” over oneself that cannot be compensated by discourses of the mind, namely education, psychology or psychiatry because they, too, are tools to contain and constrain those within it (Foucault 1984, 178). The modern soul is an invention of the political anatomy that paradoxically strives to detain and free the body. Discourses such as psychology are instituted to free the mind from its prison while carefully securing the prison doors to ensure the body will never fully escape. Furthermore, the body cannot escape the walls of the soul because this

architecture is such that the body is a constant yet ever-evolving effect of it. The body emerges as the art that is composed of this power-knowledge architecture of the soul. Now we can see the modern soul as a function of the type of power-knowledge that has been drawn together within a society that creates the docile body. I believe this relational conception of the body and the powers that collide in the world to create knowledge work as a kind of archetype for the manner in which all objects, including what we might call “pre-docile” bodies, are formed.

While Foucault traces the historical shift from the use of “ideological powers” where the body is the king’s property and serves as vessels of His power to the use of “disciplinary powers” where the body is the property of society and an object of useful appropriation, there lies an implication that in both historical instances the body takes its form within the fibers of the respective political anatomy:

It is this semio-technique of punishments, this “ideological power” which, partly at least, will remain in suspense and will be superseded by a new political anatomy, in which the body, once again, but in a new form, will be the principal character. And this new political anatomy will permit the intersection of the two divergent lines of objectification that are to be seen emerging in the eighteenth century... (Foucault 1984, 103)

In this passage, the term *body* appears to endure through the making of a new world-version by methods of deformation and weighting. Following Goodman, deformation takes place here as the two modes of objectification that formerly appeared contrary to one another are permitted to converge resulting in a new political anatomy. In this new anatomy the body was repositioned or reweighted to serve a more central role such that it became the “principal character” of power displacing that of the king. It appears to be the case that bodies relate to and

emerge from political anatomies in the way Goodman describes the mechanism of weighting such that “several portrayals of the same subject may thus place it according to different categorical schemata” (Goodman 1978, 11). The same subject, “the body,” from one world version to another is recapitulated as a new result of power-knowledge due to the categorical or organizational changes that occurred within the political anatomy. The reversibility of the docile body can no longer be perceived because the body is swept up in the emergence, dissolution and fluctuations of power relations across world versions; therefore, what one would think of as a “reversal” of the docile body would merely be the creation of a new portrayal of the body within the architecture or framework of a different set of power relations. Power relations, power-knowledge and political anatomies work as an antithesis to the existence of trans-historical entities in that the structure and concept of each entity is build on an idea of change. Foucault’s notion of the body eliminates the possible existence of what Goodman refers to as “something stolid underneath” (1978, 96). A trans-historical body would be one that underlies and persists outside of the ordering, organization and categorization of terms, objects and individuals. Since it is the case that we only come to fathom and understand the world in which we live through such processes of world-making and formations of right-world versions such an unordered world is incomprehensible. Thus, it follows that a trans-historical or eternal body that is withdrawn from society cannot exist because such a body is not knowable, and that which is not knowable cannot be created.

Goodman acknowledges that by proposing such a void of objectivity some individuals may be led recognize and accept notions of truths, facts, accuracy, and moral valuations of right or wrong amongst alternative world versions. In turn, we are without a single definition of truth and are left to ponder what degrees of merit can we assign to various consensuses of truth when there is no singular standard of it. Goodman first addresses this problem by resituating the

concept of truth as a predicate of knowledge. He admonishes that a sheer “willingness to welcome all worlds builds none” and that it is a commitment to making and remaking worlds as well as the truths that lie within them that expands the boundaries of knowledge. Knowledge as a subjective abstraction of the perceived world is a shared conceptual schema of a people in a particular society. Goodman proposes that worlds are “as much as made as found, so also knowing is as much remaking as reporting” (1978, 22). From this it follows that an object is only knowable because it has been created possessing the quality of being knowable. Thus, in this project we are reporting attributes of objects, namely the body, that were created by the knowledge vested in the soul of the body. Goodman, Foucault, and Nietzsche’s theories on the nature of knowledge seemingly converge into one notion that “knowledge... involves an inherently conditional relation to its object, a relation that presupposes or manifests specific values, interests, and goals” (Nehamas 1985, 50). While knowledge is inextricably tied to the object, the framework of powers present in the world provides the catalyst for this link. As illuminated by Goodman, knowledge emerges as power; he proposes, “Discovering laws involves drafting them. Recognizing patterns is very much a matter of inventing and imposing them. Comprehension and creation go on together” (1978, 22). In turn, the method for understanding concepts, objects and the world begins with the creation of that which one desires to understand. Through continual comprehension and creation individuals are led to understand “the nature and significance of reduction or construction or derivation or systematization” that pushes us to “give up our futile search for the aboriginal world, and come to recognize that systems and other versions are as productive as reproductive” (Goodman 1978, 100). Ultimately, I believe Goodman and Foucault call for a redirected focus away from notions of trans-historical entities so that our central position in the progression and production of new knowledges can be more aptly recognized. For, it seems that is only when we can begin to recognize our role in

world-making, truth fabrication, and normation that we can begin to better understand the consequences and implications that result from such creative power.

By piecing together the genealogical account of the body, as instances of world-making and will to power, we are able to more clearly understand why using trans-historical entities as a blueprint for life misrepresents the way objects, beliefs, and humans come into existence. The relativity of truth, attribute assignments, depictions and descriptions of the human body and the world provide a specific pathway by which the world and its entities are illuminated and experienced. The body is never a fixed entity in time, never cemented by discourses outlining biological, psychological, or philosophical theories about its nature, but is an ever-changing concept of knowledge that conforms to the truths and reality of its respective political anatomy. Thus, objects, including our bodies, are only formed and realized through the classifications, utilizations and definitions that are constructed by the powers that inevitably rise and manipulate the knowledge of a given society. A fusion of Foucault and Goodman's views within which power and knowledge create worlds, allows for truth to exist respective to the particular political anatomy that encapsulates those elements. From here, truth is no longer muddled with mystified beliefs or irrational views but can now take on the form as a mere descriptor of the phenomena in the present world. I believe this view is best captured by Zarathustra when he states, "what you have called world, that shall be created only by you: your image, your reason, your will, your love shall thus be realized. And, verily for you own bliss, you lovers of knowledge... You could not have been born either into the incomprehensible or into the irrational" (Nietzsche 1966, 88).

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