

# Health Archives and Records Group

‘Philosophical madness? Asylum records  
and gendered identities’

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# Philosophy *in* the Archives

- Archives of a particular philosopher (first editions, manuscripts and drafts, annotated books, letters, diaries, personal papers)
- Archives of a journal
- Archives of a philosophical society
- Contemporary literary / scientific / historical papers relevant to a particular project

# Philosophy *from* the Archives

- More common: archival material used to support, challenge, or contextualise an interpretation
- More unusual: archival material used as the primary sources for a philosophical argument
- Philosophy has often aimed at universal theories
- Treating archival material as primary sources means acknowledging that theories are themselves historical

# Michel Foucault

- Philosophy as Genealogy
- Starts from the present, asks how we became who we are
- Traces the historical, material, contingent conditions that led us to develop the capacities and the values we have now
- e.g. modern individuals value autonomy: how did this arise as a value?

# Norms and Perversion

- A key strategy: examining how notions of the 'abnormal' or 'deviant' arise allows us to understand more clearly what is taken to be 'normal'
- Foucault examines punishment; madness; sexual 'perversion'
- Archival documents (e.g. legal, medical, theological) provide evidence of the *discourses* and *practices* which shape human beings according to certain 'norms'

# Philosophical Madness

Archival material on asylums:

- Allows students to see concrete evidence of the kind of discourses and practices that Foucault argues shape the modern subject
- Allows students to put his *theories* to the test, especially regarding madness and sexuality
- Questions students might ask about the archives:
  - How is ‘deviancy’ diagnosed, judged, and treated?
  - What does this reveal about what is considered ‘normal’?
  - Are there different norms for men and women?
  - What does this reveal about the way our notions of subjectivity are gendered?

# Method in the Madness

- Allows students to put Foucault's *method* to the test and challenges their notion of what it means to 'do' philosophy
- Shows students how philosophy can relate to 'everyday' experiences, and encourages them to think more critically about them
- Questions that the archives material might make philosophy students ask:
  - To what extent does a philosophical theory have to fit with historical evidence?
  - Can there be a universal theory of human being, or morality, or justice?
  - What is the relationship between universal concepts and particular cases?
  - What are the concrete implications of seemingly abstract concepts and values?
  - How do power relations shape the way our concepts and values are formed and put into practice?

# Materials Examined

- Asylum records including annual reports, statistics, records of daily routine
- Admissions registers
- Case Books, details of individual patients, diagnosis, treatment, and progress.

# Power and Resistance

- Foucault is particularly interested in the ways that power relations inflect the formation of subjects and their capacities
- Power is seen as productive – not simply repressive
- Power relations produce and inhibit possibilities
- Power relations are mobile and transformable – there are always possibilities for resistance

# Case Study: Florence Lindsay

“Her habits for a long time have been indolent. Little or no interest in anything... The principal symptom of her madness is an irresistible impulse, feeling or propensity to destroy herself. It is not destructiveness generally for she has no desire to injure anybody or thing but herself. There are other feelings, and symptoms of diseased feelings or sentiments also present which may and I believe do impel her to commit suicide and make her altogether an irresponsible being”

[Case Book, 1836]

# Florence Lindsay

- Slippage from medical to moral judgement
- Changing diagnoses (e.g. madness/post-natal depression) and changing assumptions behind those diagnoses
- Question of whose voice is heard
- Possibilities for resistance
- Intersection of judgements concerning madness, gender, and class, and what these reveal about expected 'norms'

# The Voice of the Other

“Excitement and depression are no adequate terms for what I feel. At one time I am as if I were in Hell suffering all the torments of the damned and then I make every effort to destroy myself; at other times I feel as if far beyond this world and already in the realms of bliss. There are depths of misery which we (insane) suffer and an amount of happiness which we enjoy which no sane mind is capable of comprehending or conceiving”

- Note of Mrs Lindsay; written on front page of doctor's case book 1849/50.