

To Examine Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* Through the Lens of
Coleman's *Internal Analysis of System Behavior*

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1. Introduction

Challenging the Enlightenment humanism which framed institutions like law, medicine, and education as liberating, Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* traces how modern society exercises power and produces compliant individuals through surveillance and normalization. By contrast to Foucault's systemic level account, Coleman's *Foundations of Social Theory* insists that any sufficient explanation of systemic outcomes must be grounded in individual purposive action.

This paper examines Foucault's account of disciplinary power through the lens of Coleman's metatheory called Internal Analysis of System Behavior, asking whether Foucault provides a sufficient explanation for how disciplinary society is formed. This paper argues that although Foucault offers a compelling historical account of how disciplinary institutions emerge and operate, his framework lacks the internal analysis structure Coleman demands, as he denies the agency of people. This paper elaborates on this argument by first summarizing Foucault's arguments in *Discipline and Punish* by deconstructing his grounds, warrants and conclusions. Then, I'll present Coleman's propositions and his potential critique with respect to Foucault's ideas. Ultimately, this paper will reexamine the weaknesses in both Foucault's arguments and Coleman's perspective in approaching them.

2. Exposition

2.1. Grounds

In establishing his argument, Foucault first frames a conceptual model illustrating how discipline operates like a Panopticon. Quoted from Bentham's Panopticon concept, it is structured as "*at the periphery, an annular building; at the center, a tower*" (Foucault, 1975). At the annular buildings, inmates are fully visible at all times to the observers at the central tower, yet they can never confirm whether they're being watched at any given moment. Moreover, inmates are separated into isolated rooms by the side walls, which prevent them from communicating with companions in the same annular buildings (Foucault, 1975). By contrast, the inspector at the center sees everything without being seen. This state of prisoners is described as "*He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication*" (Foucault, 1975). The Panopticon thus serves as the architectural embodiment of Foucault's definition of discipline, defined as "*a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets*" (1975). It is neither an institution nor an apparatus, but a technology of power that can be operated across any site.

Moving onto empirical grounds, Foucault proposes that population growth is the empirical foundation for the emergence of modern disciplinary society. As he notes, "*One aspect of this conjuncture was the large demographic thrust of the eighteenth century*" (Foucault, 1975). Such population growth includes rapid increase in school, hospital populations and a peacetime army exceeding 200,000 men by the end of the century. Along with the population growth is the development of capitalist production, which Foucault also directly mentions: "*The other aspect of the conjuncture was the growth in the apparatus of production, which was becoming more and more extended and complex*" (1975), which makes productive systems become more costly to operate. Both these changes created an urgent need to manage large numbers of people efficiently, which laid the foundation of the emerging disciplinary power.

A third empirical ground is the development of Enlightenment law and the proliferation of ideas of liberty. Foucault observes, "*Historically, the process by which the bourgeoisie became in the course of the eighteenth century, the politically dominant class was masked by the establishment of an explicit, coded and formally egalitarian juridical framework, made possible by the organization of a parliamentary, representative régime*" (1975). This historical

evidence marked a shift toward a formally egalitarian legal structure, which was accompanied by the public proclamation of individual liberty and equity as the defining values of modern society.

2.2. Warrants

W1. Economically: Why Discipline Satisfies the Need of the Era

Faced with the pressure from population growth, disciplinary power emerged as a response to the need to obtain the exercise of power at the lowest possible cost (Foucault, 1975). Given the traditional authority often requires the visibility of those in power and manifestation of their brilliance, it often relies on displaying “*ostentatious signs of sovereignty*,” in Foucault (1975)’s words. Specific execution such as public spectacle, military force, and taxation all demand substantial material and human expenditure and could be expensive. Besides, the resistance encountered further weakened the traditional authority maintained through visibility, which “*forced it into a cycle of perpetual reinforcement*” (Foucault, 1975). Alternatively, discipline offered a cheaper approach by transferring the visibility onto those being managed rather than the authority itself. As how the Panopticon operates, discipline makes those being managed the objects of observation, yet they can neither see the authority nor others (Foucault, 1975). This inversion of see-seen relationship makes discipline economical in two senses. In methodological terms, it operated through “*timetables, collective training, exercises, total and detailed surveillance*” (Foucault, 1975), rather than costly spectacles. Politically, by keeping the population visible and isolated, it ensures little resistance as it neutralizes the intrinsic, adverse force of multiplicity (Foucault, 1975).

Furthermore, this economic drive is supported by the mutually reinforcing relationship between growing population and the development of capitalism. As Foucault indicates, “*the two processes – the accumulation of men and the accumulation of capital – cannot be separated*”; “*Each makes the other possible and necessary*” (1975). Specifically, managing a growing population necessitated the expansion of productive apparatuses, as sustaining an increasingly large population was impossible without a corresponding growth in the apparatus of production; for example, hospitals are needed to cure the sick. On the other hand, the development of capitalism equally depended on not only a growing but also a disciplined population. As productive apparatuses become increasingly complex, it creates a demand on an optimized workforce who’s efficient, punctual, and obedient. Hence, division of labor and elaboration of disciplinary techniques are all needed to create useful bodies and respond to such mutually reinforcing circles (Foucault, 1975). Foucault does not present discipline as a deliberately designed system driven by any specific human actors such as government or companies. Hence, it appears more to emerge as an emergent property from the aggregation of individuals simply pursuing their own immediate interests under the context of growing population and capitalism. However, what motivates specific individuals to manage or be managed is still unaddressed. This will be further explored later in this piece.

W2. Political: How Discipline Coexists with Social Order

The second warrant addresses how discipline coexists with Enlightenment ideals of liberty. While Enlightenment law proclaimed formal equity, Foucault argues that its foundation is inherently dependent on disciplinary mechanisms operating beneath the surface: “*The real, corporal disciplines constituted the foundation of the formal, juridical liberties*” (1975). Specifically, he reckons that the orderly, law-abiding citizen, which Enlightenment liberty presupposes, is itself a product of discipline. For individuals to exercise equity and liberty through legal framework, they must first be rendered predictable and manageable through surveillance. As Foucault puts it, “*The Enlightenment, which discovered the liberties, also invented the disciplines*” (1975), but often the disciplines are covered by the liberty on surface. In practice, this means

that what appears as equality is consistently undermined by the disciplinary mechanism underneath. For instance, contractual relationships are systematically distorted by workshop discipline that imposes subordination of workers, even when the contract appears to guarantee equality between employer and worker. Besides, while law guarantees universal rights such as access to education, the school grades, ranks, and hierarchizes individuals. Thus, the discipline doesn't contradict with the law but in fact operates beneath it.

W3. Knowledge: What Sustains the Expansion of Disciplinary Power

Finally, as established in W1 that discipline aims to render individuals manageable, predictable, and correctable. Such effective management, in turn, requires detailed knowledge of those being managed. Discipline henceforth transforms individuals into objects of study, seeking to *"insidiously objectifies those on whom it is applied; to form a body of knowledge about these individuals"* (Foucault, 1975). This is systematized within the disciplinary institutions such as hospitals or schools, where the formation of clinical medicine, psychiatry, child psychology, educational psychology, and the rationalization of labor all becomes possible (Foucault, 1975). Hence, within institutions, any mechanism used to study, observe, and record individuals, and produce detailed, systemized knowledge about them, simultaneously functions as a means of controlling them. For example, in a hospital, the diagnosis and classification of patients also produces medical knowledge about human behavior and conditions, which helps decide who's normal, who's deviant, and how they should be managed. Consequently, knowledge and disciplinary power become mutually reinforcing cycle, as Foucault describes, *"any mechanism of objectification could be used in them (institutions) as an instrument of subjection"* (1975). Disciplinary power thus becomes ever more precise and expansive, as the accumulation of knowledge continuously enables more refined mechanisms of control within institutions. Importantly, much like how discipline as an emergent property discussed in W1, the consolidation of such power through knowledge is also an unintended consequence of individuals doing their job in producing knowledge.

2.3. Conclusion

In conclusion, Foucault believes that modern society has become a disciplinary society, a universal Panopticon. Such a disciplinary society has several key features.

C1. Disciplinary power is characterized first by its omnipresence and unverifiability. It is everywhere because discipline is not confined to any single institution, but rather *"infiltrated the others, sometimes undermining them, but serving as an intermediary between them, linking them together, extending them and above all making it possible to bring the effects of power to the most minute and distant elements"* (Foucault, 1975), assuring an *"infinitesimal distribution of the power relations"* (1975) across schools, hospitals, factories, and prisons alike. At the same time, it remains unverifiable: the observer tower is there, visible, yet whether anyone is actively watching at any given moment remains unverifiable. In the Panopticon, this is achieved through the design of venetian blinds, partitioned walls, and zig-zag openings ensured no sound or light would betray the inspector's presence. In modern social life, for instance, monitor cameras are installed everywhere in public spaces, but individuals can never confirm whether anyone will actively watch their footage at any given moment.

C2. Power no longer needs to be continuously exercised to remain effective; it is self-sustaining. The unverifiability discussed in C1 produces a profound psychological effect on the ones being monitored. Since one never confirms whether they're being watched, they can permanently assume they are, and regulate their behavior accordingly (Foucault, 1975). Hence, this seemingly voluntary internalization of being watched and self regulation is exactly what discipline aims to foster on individuals:

“to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power”, such that *“the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary ”* (Foucault, 1975).

C3. Institutions have already made discipline a perfect, irreversible mechanism. For one thing, as established in W2, discipline provides the behavioral foundation that makes juridical order possible, while law lends discipline its legitimate cover. With this mutually reinforcing cycle, modern discipline would always operate beneath law. For another, as indicated in W3, social institutions such as schools and hospitals sustain the process in which knowledge facilitates more nuanced, direct surveillance. Collectively, discipline has become so deeply embedded in modern institutions that it is impossible to dismantle or reverse.

3. Translation

3.1. Coleman’s Proposition

P1. Internal Analysis of System Behavior

Coleman’s metatheory rests on the proposition that social systems cannot be explained at the system level alone. He compares two major ways in analyzing social behavior: statistical association, which remains on a macro level, and internal analysis of system behavior, which he describes as *“examining processes internal to the system, involving its component parts, or units at a level below that of the system”* (Coleman, 1990), that is, any adequate account of social phenomena must move down to the level of individual actions and back up again to explain systemic outcomes. To illustrate this, Coleman likens sociology to a simulation game composed of two inseparable components: the players, who each carry a principle of action defining their interests and goals, and the structure of the game, which sets the rules governing how individual actions combine to produce systemic outcomes (Coleman, 1990). With that, he insists that diving into the individual level to explain system behavior is necessary. His graphic illustration of this framework is known as Coleman’s Boat, which demonstrates that explaining how macro outcomes arise from macro conditions must pass through the individual level, following the path below:

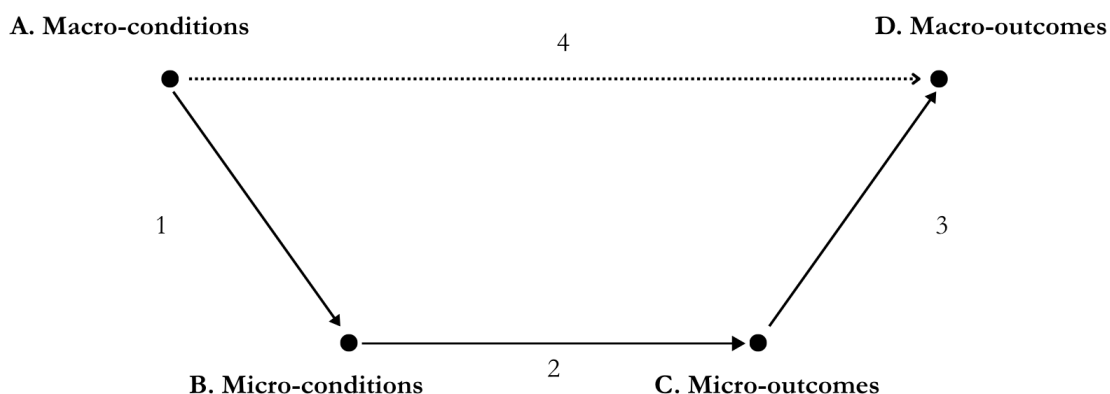


Figure 1: Graphic Explanation of Coleman’s Boat

Coleman justifies this framework with four reasons. First, system-level data is inadequate, as *“there are too many alternative hypotheses which cannot be rejected by the data”* (1990). By contrast, individual-level data is a more reliable source for quantitative analysis. Second, individual-level explanations are more useful for

interventions, as he believes “a successful explanation of system behavior in terms of the actions or orientations of lower-level units is ordinarily more useful for intervention than is an equally successful explanation which remains at the level of the system itself” (1990). Third, he argues such an explanation is more stable and universal than a system-level explanation (Coleman, 1990). Finally, the internal analysis of system behavior is “grounded in a humanistically congenial image of man” (Coleman, 1990), which resists treating individuals as mere products of social forces with no agency.

P2. Methodological Individualism & Theory of Purposeful Action

This emphasis on individual agency leads directly to the micro-level foundation of Coleman’s framework: the theory of purposive action. Rather than treating individuals as passive products of social forces, Coleman assumes that individuals act toward goals guided by their own interests. He proposes three major reasons for adopting this assumption in sociological research.

First, purposive action provides greater scientific precision. Coleman argues that methodological individualism “vitiates much of the anti-teleology case” (1990). In other words, although purposive action is teleological in nature, it fundamentally differs from the functionalist explanations, which explain why an institution exists by pointing to its function in the system, but never addresses why individuals actually choose to build or comply with it. Unlike functionalism, purposive action is unidirectional, where explanatory power of systemic outcomes is located at what goals and interests drive individuals to act. Besides, he believes a non-purposive theory of human behavior is self-contradictory. As Coleman observes, “social scientists are human beings, and the object of their study is the action of human beings” (1990). This means any theory that denies purposive action poses a paradox for the theories themselves, since the very act of constructing such a theory is itself a purposive action. Finally, purposive action enables cross-disciplinary coherence. As Coleman suggests other disciplines like ethics, economics, and law all share such universal basis of an image of man as a purposive and responsible actor. Hence, this assumption would benefit from grounding itself in this common conceptual base.

3.2. Coleman’s response to Foucault

R1. A Structural Critique of Foucault’s Account: The Missing Individual Agency

From Coleman’s perspective, Foucault’s account successfully establishes the macro-level conditions (A) and macro-outcome (D) of disciplinary society, but leaves critical gaps in the individual-level justifications, as illustrated in Figure 2. Without explaining how and why individuals choose surveillance as the response to the macro-conditions of population and capitalism growth, Foucault’s account treats individuals as automatic products of what systems want them to be, bypassing the purposive action that Coleman insists must form the core of any sufficient theory.

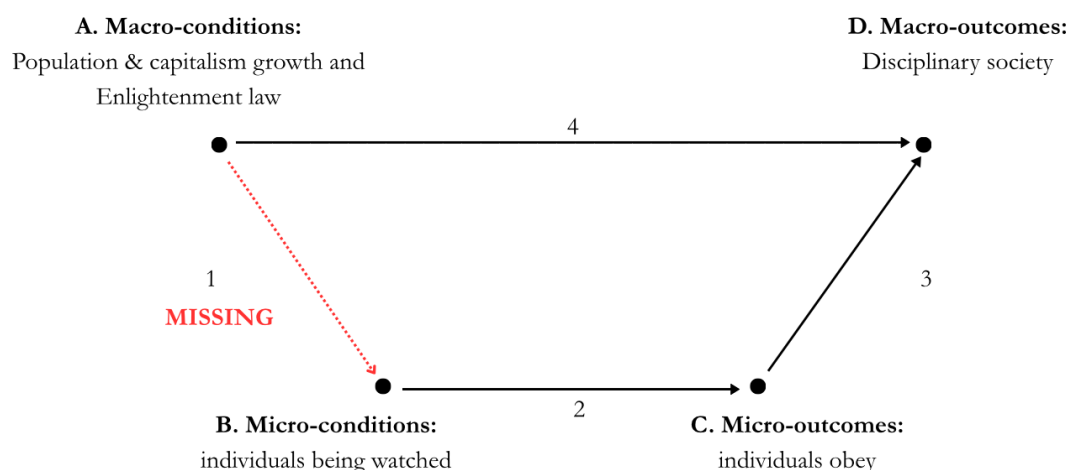


Figure 2: Foucault’s Arguments in Coleman’s Boat

After putting Foucault's theory into Coleman's Boat, a closer examination of his micro-level constructions reveals the problem more specifically. To his credit, Foucault does partially explain arrow 2, for which he implicitly suggests that individuals comply with discipline out of a desire to avoid punishment, as being watched creates the fear of misconduct caught by the watcher. He also touches upon arrow 3, as he believes the notion that discipline is an emergent, decentralized system of how individual acts of compliance aggregate into a disciplinary society at the macro level (without any single actor deliberately orchestrating the outcome). However, what remains missing is arrow 1 of how macro-level conditions as population growth and capitalist development translate into the specific decisions of companies and governments to adopt and develop disciplinary mechanisms, and of disciplined individuals to decide to accept and maintain them. For instance, Coleman might ask, what specific incentives led individual factory owners to implement timetables and hierarchical surveillance as their preferred means of managing workers, if there're other methods such as wage incentives that could also be cost-effective?

Beyond arrow 1, Foucault's explanation of arrow 2 is also incomplete, as it denies individual agency in a self-contradictory way. Foucault's phrasing of discipline as producing "predictable" individuals implies that without such disciplinary mechanisms, individuals would have the tendency to behave unpredictably. This latent capacity for deviation is itself a form of agency. Conversely, once discipline is established, Foucault's account in this piece focuses almost exclusively on how individuals become compliant. It therefore becomes questionable whether this dominant strategy of compliance is still a meaningful agentic choice or simply a structurally forced decision masked by. By unintentionally acknowledging agency exists outside of the disciplinary structure with its "unpredictability" nature while treating compliance as the only possible form of action under discipline, Foucault leaves open the question of whether compliance under discipline constitutes a meaningful agentic choice or is simply structurally forced.

Finally, even if arrow 2 is partially accounted for by fear and punishment, arrow 3 also leaves some problems unresolved. The acts of obeying different institutionalized individuals, such as a doctor, a teacher, and policeman, all follow their own independent logic with no obvious connection among them. Hence, if the discipline is only an emergent property that's systemized and simply relies on dispersed, uncoordinated acts of compliance, it could be hard for these dispersed actions to aggregate into a coherent disciplinary society. Consequently, arrow 3 seems more to be an assumed outcome rather than a fully demonstrated mechanism.

R2. A Methodological Critique on Foucault's Functionalism

From a methodological perspective, Coleman would contend that the missing arrow 1 in Foucault's justification logic is not accidental, but a structural consequence of Foucault's functionalist methodology. Foucault entirely explains the existence of institutions, law, and knowledge through the functions they serve within the system in his warrants. For example, he argues that institutions exist because they monitor and manage the populations and keep people in line with the demands of capitalist development; law exists because it provides legitimate cover for discipline, while discipline exists because it provides the foundation and necessary condition for law; knowledge exists because it makes power more precise and effective. However, as Coleman argues earlier in P2, this functionalist mode of explanation is fundamentally unscientific and circular. It assumes the system would automatically maintain itself in a self-perpetuating state, as shown above in Foucault's warrants, which therefore keeps the argument permanently at the macro level and traps the logic circular as each part of the system exists because it is useful to the system. Consequently, functionalism neither needs nor is able to produce a micro-level explanation, which makes it never ask questions concerning the origin of disciplinary society: who decides to build these institutions, or why individuals choose to comply with, build, or maintain them.

4. Critique

4.1. On Foucault

C1. The Underdetermined Causal Link Between Historical Need and Disciplinary Emergence

While Foucault's economic warrant W1 establishes a plausible connection between population growth, capitalist development, and the need for a more efficient management, the causal link between this need and the emergence of disciplinary society as a specific response remains undemonstrated. This is also the basis of Coleman's critique on missing arrow 1 (macro-level condition to micro-level condition) in Foucault's logic. That is, the existence of a need does not justify why it was discipline that was inevitably chosen by the individuals to meet the needs of the era rather than alternative mechanisms. Market mechanism, for instance, could equally account for the behavioral outcomes Foucault attributes to discipline. Zooming into this mechanism, workers are naturally driven to become punctual, obedient, and efficient by the wage incentives and the threat of unemployment; in this sense, the competition mechanism itself in the market could regulate, train, and manage bodies without requiring the elaborate panoptic apparatus and external authority Foucault describes. Foucault neither addresses any potential alternatives nor demonstrates discipline's comparative advantages over these alternatives. Consequently, the warrant fails to demonstrate that discipline was the necessary or inevitable response to the conjunctures he identifies.

C2. Correlation vs. Causation

A similar problem runs through Foucault's 2nd and 3rd warrants, which is his tendency to use correlation to argue for causation. In both warrants regarding law and knowledge (W2 and W3), Foucault assumes a specific, one directional causal relationship from discipline to law and knowledge respectively without sufficient justification.

First, on the relationship between law and discipline, as mentioned in W2, Foucault argues that discipline serves as the foundation of Enlightenment law; people must first be disciplined into orderly, law-abiding citizens before a formal juridical framework can function. However, this causal direction is far from self-evident because many legal theories were developed much prior to the systematic emergence of modern disciplinary institutions. For example, Hobbes's *Leviathan* contends political order and the decision of electing a *Leviathan* is a product of individuals' aggregate, rational choice to avoid living a life that's nasty, brutish, and short in the natural state of humans. With that, the casual direction proposed by Foucault could be potentially reversed by arguing that the legal concepts and frameworks may have come first and provides the legitimizing framework within which the disciplinary mechanisms could subsequently operate.

The same issue applies to the relationship between discipline and knowledge proposed. Foucault claims that the systematic observation and recording of individuals within disciplinary institutions gave rise to fields such as medicine, psychology, and education. However, these disciplines all have their own independent intellectual histories that predate the rise of modern disciplinary institutions. Furthermore, given that Foucault provides no empirical ground establishing that knowledge was only systematized after discipline, this casual claim is even weaker as the warrant is entirely unsupported by any empirical evidence. Just like how legal frameworks could come before disciplines, the development of knowledge may have equally made discipline possible, rather than simply being produced by it. Hence, in both cases, Foucault identifies a mutually reinforcing relationship and assumes one specific causal direction without

ruling out the equally reverse possibilities. This makes his warrants more correlational rather than causal as he intended.

C3: Insufficient Justification of Discipline's Irreversibility

Finally, Foucault's claim that disciplinary power is irreversible is also questionable. Throughout history, there're many examples of power structures that once deemed permanent but ultimately collapsed, such as feudalism, colonial empires, and totalitarian regimes, which all appeared self-sustaining at the very beginning. Foucault's argument that the evidence and warrant that discipline is deeply embedded in modern institutions is not adequate evidence to argue for its absolute irreversibility. In addition, more fundamentally, Foucault's own act of writing this piece, *Discipline and Punish*, poses a self-contradiction. If disciplinary power is truly all-pervasive, unverifiable, irreversible, and leaves no space outside its reach, Foucault's capacity to expose it and theorize it becomes difficult to explain. In other words, the very existence of such a critique implies that individuals retain some capacity to step outside of the system and reflect upon it. Even though Foucault might respond by positioning intellectuals as a distinct sphere capable of reflecting outside the system, this itself remains an undefended axiom rather than a demonstrated conclusion.

4.2. On Coleman's response to Foucault

While Coleman is correct that Foucault never grounds his arguments into an individual-level analysis, the significance for Foucault to do so is less compelling when examined against Coleman's own justifications for the benefits of internal analysis.

Regarding reason 1 and 2 on data adequacy and the utility of intervention, these two justifications are conceptually valid, but their application value to Foucault's arguments is weaker. Specifically, this is due to the fact that Foucault's work is less identified as empirical social science but a genealogical critique of how modern power operates historically. As a result, individual-level data is not the appropriate standard of evaluation. Besides, Foucault explicitly proposes no intervention and believes in no straightforward alternative to disciplinary society, which is communicated through his conclusion that disciplinary society is irreversible. Thus, rendering Coleman's criterion of utility for intervention might also be irrelevant in this context.

Coleman's proposed reason 3 of how individual-level explanations are more stable and universal, however, is more conceptually weak. While there may be common ground on individual behaviors and actions, the variability could also be strong. In Foucault's context, specifically, individual responses to the same disciplinary mechanism could vary enormously from compliance, resistance, or utilization and exploitation, although Foucault only covers the first possibility in his arguments. It could be possible that systemic level patterns are more stable than individual-level evaluations.

However, it is worth mentioning that even if system-level patterns could be more stable than micro-level ones, this doesn't render micro-level analysis completely irrelevant. Specifically, from Coleman's perspective, because the system level outcomes still originate from micro-level cost and benefit analysis of individual actors, such calculation and decision-making processes at the micro-level still need to be examined in order to deduce the systemic outcome (arrow 3). More critically, going back to Coleman's R2, even if a macro-level explanation could demonstrate how the disciplinary system is maintained once established, the question of how it first came into being and why individuals initially chose to build and submit to it still demands a micro-level account the Foucault never provides.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* offers a compelling macro-level account of how modern disciplinary society emerged from population growth, capitalist development, and Enlightenment law. Coleman's *Internal Analysis of System Behavior* emphasizes the significance of individual-level examination of system behavior and adopting methodological individualism. Coleman would critique Foucault for 1. leaving the transition from micro-condition to micro-outcomes untheorized, and 2. adopting a problematic functionalist methodology that is logically circular and prevents individual-level explanation. The critique on Foucault further reveals that his warrants suffer from fallacy of 1. conflating correlation with causation in his warrants, and 2. offering insufficient and self-contradictory justification of disciplinary society's irreversibility. Ultimately, this paper argues that though Coleman's meta-theory does not fully apply to Foucault's work's genealogical nature, adopting Coleman's boat structure would still strengthen Foucault's arguments by answering the question of individual-level origin of building and submitting to a disciplinary society.

6. Bibliography

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