It is difficult to decide how to start with Foucault (1926–1984). Disposed of vast intellectual interests encompassing not only history, philosophy and society, but psychology, politics and literature, from a distance he appears as a typical 20th century French scholar of high accomplishment. Having been well born and properly raised, he had access to preparatory school, then an elite university, where he worked with the ranking professors, struggling just enough to fully deserve a fine career. He repaid his debt to society for that refined education by busying himself about France, Europe and elsewhere, publishing numerous major books and articles, giving a non-stop stream of lectures and interviews, along the way returning regularly to the library to verify his sources. Finally, finding time to champion a few radical causes, he demonstrated the political sincerity at the base of his being, which, particularly in France, is part of the professional package. While all this is a certain truth about Foucault, it is a distortion nonetheless.

This is not to suggest that Foucault failed to cover those standard steps in what is known in France as the Royal Way to success and prominence, because he did. He was born to a family of medical doctors; after initial studies in the town of his birth, Poitiers, he moved to Paris. After a year of preparatory studies at the exclusive lycée, St. Stanislaus near Montparnasse, he passed the examination for entry into the École Nationale Supérieur (ENS) which, in the humanities, marks a top rung for France, if not the world. Along the way, he attracted the interest and aid from a number of the major French intellectuals of the day, including Jean Hyppolite (1907–1968), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) and Louis Althusser (1918–1990); so far, so good. However, those generalities hide the ragged truth of his struggle to find a place in society.

To begin with, laying the groundwork for a lifelong authority problem which he took to the grave, he did not get along with his father. On finishing at the lycée (high school), he failed the examination for direct entrance into ENS, and was required to spend an additional year in preparatory
school. Once there, he was not well socially integrated or particularly adept for the work. Commenting on classic texts, penning paragraphs by hand as if written by a typewriter, avoiding commentary, accepting the passive absorption of professorial performances in lecture halls was not Foucault’s style. He was so disinclined along those lines and so poorly equipped to work this out otherwise that while at the university he was led to express the ultimate cry for salvation, or was it, in his case, the definitive announcement of bad-faith, by attempting suicide—twice.

On finishing at ENS, there was another major hurdle, a test called the *aggrégation*; he failed it the first time and had to remain an extra year to deepen his capacities, before a successful second try. He was regularly complimented for his precocious grasp of complex questions but when the tension mounted, he seemed unable to deliver a superior performance.

During his university years he acknowledged, at least to himself, that he was gay. If this shamed him or his father and whether it turned him away from his classmates or assignments, it is difficult to say how this private fact played out in his public life, other than, ultimately, to help cut it short. Foucault died of AIDS, which, due to confusion and institutional denial, killed hundreds of thousands before it was taken seriously enough for epidemiological study. That was the end, in 1984, of “Michel” Foucault, since he had long ago truncated the Paul from his original Paul-Michel, which had been added at christening as a sign that he was the son of a father named Dr. Paul Foucault.

It is rare for someone with such professional notoriety while still living and an even more enormous posthumous stature, to have died in ignominy; but effectively that was Foucault’s lot. In the early 1980s, AIDS was denied as a general condition. Considered then as exclusively limited to gay men and due to the politically conservative and religiously fundamentalist sentiment against them, the condition was largely ignored by the legitimate medical establishment. When he finally weakened enough to have to be hospitalized, doctors avoided being direct with anyone about his condition; as he was shamefully shuffled between hospitals as if a danger for respectable folks of good faith and necessarily also, of ‘normal’ health.

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1 Homosexuality. For a controversial but very well documented biography of Foucault (where, among other issues, the nature of Foucault’s sexual behavior is decrypted as a sign of issues related to his scholarship) see James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (1994).
2 Foucault’s intimate companion for twenty years prior to his death, Daniel Defert, while initially refusing commentary regarding Foucault’s personal life, ultimately