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To my mother Rosa Matilde Navas Pietri,
and to my father Ricardo Mario Rodríguez Jimenez

Human being has this choice, this unique choice: either nothingness or a God. Choosing nothingness, he turns himself into a God, and turns God in to a ghost, for it is impossible, if there is no God, that human being and everything surrounding human being be nothing but a ghost. I repeat: God is and he is outside of me, a living being, existing by and for itself, or else me, I am a God. There is no other possibility.

Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi

An anti-metaphysical view of the world—yes, but an artistic one.

Friedrich Nietzsche

The story goes that, before or after he died, he found himself before God and he said: “I, who have been so many men in vain, want to be one man: myself.” The voice of God replied from a whirlwind: “Neither am I one self; I dreamed the world as you dreamed your work, my Shakespeare, and among the shapes of my dream are you, who, like me, are many persons—and none.”

Jorge Luis Borges

Such was a poet and shall be and is—
who'll solve the depths of horror to defend
a sunbeam's architecture with his life:
and carve immortal jungles of despair
to hold a mountain's heartbeat in his hand.

E.E. Cummings

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And to Junko because more and more of this life!!! Thank you

ABSTRACT

The goal of this dissertation is to bring into view the systematicity and explanatory force of Foucault's ethical views, thereby filling important gaps in Foucault scholarship and in contemporary ethical discourse. The dissertation itself takes the form of an enquiry into the place and role of the notion of an aesthetics of existence in Foucault's philosophical and ethical views. The method of enquiry is a reconstruction of the development of Foucault's ethical, intellectual and political project, as well as of the conceptual framework and methodology that he developed in order to bring it to fruition. Particular attention is paid to Nietzsche's influence on Foucault's reconceptualization of the notions of truth, history and subjectivity in the early 1950s, and to the analysis of the relationship between subjectivity and truth that he carried out in the last stage of his career, from 1978 to 1984.

The result of this work reveals that Foucault's ethical views are based on novel conceptions of freedom, and of the normative structure of rational agency, and of the binding force of norms (of the kind of relation between individuals and norms that calls for the former to comply with the latter). On Foucault's view, the ethical life today is not to be conceived as a life characterized by compliance with a code of norms which individuals are bound to obey by virtue of constitutive facts about the kinds of creatures that they are. The ethical life is to be conceived as a life characterized by the individual's active, reflexive and sustained engagement in the project of constituting herself as an autonomous subject through the continued practice of piecemeal critique of both her ways of thinking and being, and of the ways in which she is called upon to think and to be within her culture.

Part I

Introduction

CHAPTER 1

ETHICS: THE WILL TO TRUTH AND THE AESTHETICS OF EXISTENCE

In the concluding paragraph of his notes for the lecture delivered on February 29, 1984 at the *Collège de France*, Michel Foucault writes:

The question of nihilism is not: if God does not exist, everything is permitted. Its formula is rather a question: how to live if I must face up to the fact that ‘nothing is true’? At the heart of Western culture lies the difficulty of defining the link between the concern for the truth and the aesthetics of existence.¹

This reformulation of the nihilist slogan is an expression of the cornerstone of Foucault’s ethical views: from the putative fact that there is no human telos, it would not follow that everything is permitted; from the putative fact that there are no universal ends that all humans alike are committed to pursue merely by virtue of being human, it would not follow that ethical norms altogether lack binding force. Yet although this claim is the cornerstone of Foucault’s ethical views, its content and significance are difficult to understand and have been in fact almost invariably misunderstood. The main goal of my dissertation is to rectify this misunderstanding, and in so doing, to bring into view the plausibility and full explanatory force of Foucault’s ethical position.

The difficulty in understanding the central insight behind Foucault’s reformulation of the nihilist slogan, the claim that from the putative fact that there is no human telos it would not follow that ethical norms lack binding force altogether, is that it seems to lead to an interpretive dilemma. One interpretation, which we may refer to as the *voluntaristic* interpretation, can seem *prima facie* appealing on grounds of charitableness. On this interpretation, that there is no human telos would imply that there are no universally binding ethical norms. Yet this would not mean that ethical norms lack binding force altogether. It would only mean that it is up to each individual to decide whether or not to accept or reject any given norm. So long as an individual were committed to comply with a norm, that norm would have binding force over her.

1. Michel Foucault. *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 190 (175).

The problem with this voluntaristic interpretation is that it involves a confused conception of the binding force of ethical norms, and is consequently less charitable than it may initially seem. That it is up to the individual to decide whether or not a norm has binding force over her would leave room for the possibility that she decide to submit to a norm and make it part of ‘her code.’ Yet by the same token it would leave room for the possibility that at any given moment, she whimsically decide to forfeit her commitment to submit to that norm. Since on this view, the binding force of an ethical norm is taken to depend on the individual’s commitment to it, this would mean that upon her giving up that commitment, and by virtue of her having given it up, the norm would cease to have binding force over her. Thus on this conception of the ‘binding force’ of ethical norms, ‘ought’ claims would be best understood as involving an implicit but non-negligible qualification: “you ought to do this... unless you don’t want to.” This would effectively amount to the admission that ethical norms altogether lack binding force. On the voluntaristic interpretation of the claim that ethical norms would have binding force even if there were no human telos, that claim turns out to be a misleading reformulation of the claim that if ‘God is dead, everything is permitted:’ a confused attempt to preserve in word what has been irretrievably lost in spirit.

The deeper problem is that there would seem to be no alternative to the voluntaristic interpretation. So the claim that from the fact that there is no human telos it would not follow that everything is permitted seems to force us, as interpreters of Foucault, to choose between two equally uncharitable alternatives: attributing him a voluntaristic and thus implausible view of the binding force of ethical norms, or granting the lack of intelligibility of his views on the matter.

To this exegetical problem corresponds a substantive philosophical problem. If these are the only interpretive options, and if, on independent grounds, we are sympathetic to the view that there is no reason for believing that there is a human telos, we seem to be forced to choose between two ethical positions that are as unappealing as those two interpretations of Foucault’s ethical views: either we have no reason to believe that ethical norms have

binding force, properly speaking, or we have no reason to believe that the fact that they do have binding force is intelligible, no reason to think that it is rational to think of ourselves as bound by ethical norms. On this scenario, even if ethical norms have binding force, the possibility of providing a rational account of this fact is ruled out.²

The source of these problems lies in the fact that Foucault's reformulation of the nihilist slogan is meant to challenge an assumption so deeply engrained in traditional philosophical thinking that it has become ubiquitous. The assumption, namely, that if there is no human telos, ethical norms lack binding force. It is insofar as we ourselves are committed to that assumption that Foucault's reformulation of the slogan is bound to seem to us confused at best, unintelligible at worst.

To show that this is the source of these interpretive and philosophical problems, to provide an alternative interpretation of Foucault's reformulation of the nihilist slogan, and to present, situate and defend the plausibility of the ethical position of which it is the cornerstone are the main goals of my dissertation. The project is thus best understood as driven by two sets of concerns, some primarily interpretive, the others directly philosophical. Since I have structured the dissertation in accordance with the interpretive concerns, it will be useful to elaborate on them before providing an outline of the dissertation.

2. One might be inclined to object in the following way: the very fact that the view that there is no telos implies that we have no reason to think that ethical norms have binding force is a *prima facie* reason for believing that there is a human telos. But such an objection would be an instance of the 'wishful thinking' fallacy (i.e. a form of *petitio principii*). That I *wish* it possible—supposing I do—to give a rational account of the binding force of ethical norms *is not* a good reason *for believing that* the conditions under which it would be possible for me to give such an account obtain. That (1) I *know* it possible—supposing I do—to provide a rational account of the binding force of ethical norms, and that (2) I *know*—supposing I do—that this is possible only if I have rational grounds for believing that there is a human telos *would* jointly constitute a good reason for me to think that there is a human telos. But it is hard to see how it could be possible to know those two facts without having already established on independent rational grounds that there is a human telos, for (2) implies that (1) can only be the case if I have good reasons to believe that there is a human telos.

1.1 Interpretive Goals

As I said, the source of the difficulty in understanding Foucault's reformulation of the nihilist slogan is that its purpose is to challenge the assumption that unless there is a human telos, ethical norms lack binding force, or what amounts to the same, that unless there is a human telos there are no genuinely binding ethical norms. This assumption is so deeply engrained in the tradition that it is difficult for us to even see what the alternative might be. Thus it can seem that Foucault's attempt to challenge it is bound to be confused. This, as we shall see, is but the first item in a list of problems common to contemporary interpretations of Foucault's ethical views.

Immediately after proposing a reformulation of the nihilist slogan, Foucault makes a strikingly strong diagnostic claim. At the heart of Western culture, he tells us, lies the difficulty of defining the link between *the concern for the truth* and *the aesthetics of existence*. In this context, "the concern for the truth"—an explicit reference to Nietzsche—is an alternative way of referring to the standpoint from which, on Foucault's reformulation of the slogan, it would be necessary to face the fact that 'nothing is true.' The "aesthetics of existence," in turn, is Foucault's enigmatic term of art for his suggested response to the nihilist challenge once it is properly understood. Accordingly, the statement that at the heart of Western culture lies the difficulty of defining the link between the concern for the truth and the aesthetics of existence is to be understood as the claim the central ethical challenge that we are facing today is that of *understanding* the fact that the answer to the question "How to live if we must face up to the fact that 'nothing is true'?" is: "By adopting the standpoint of an aesthetics of existence." By Foucault's own lights, the key for understanding his ethical views lies in the challenge of understanding both his reformulation of the nihilist slogan, and why once the necessity of this reformulation has been understood, it becomes necessary to adopt the standpoint of an aesthetics of existence. And yet...

In recent years, the trend has been to regard the notion of *parrhesia*, the notion of the commitment to live for the truth, both in the sense of living in the pursuit of the truth,

and in the sense of living in accordance with the truth regardless of the risks involved in living such a life, as the cornerstone of Foucault's ethical views. On these parrhesia-centered interpretations, the role of "the aesthetics of existence" tends to be downplayed. The aesthetics of existence tends to be understood as a way of expressing the view that ethical life can be regarded as a technical task, in the ancient sense of *techne*³; its aesthetic dimension tends to be understood as Foucault's way of highlighting the fact that undertaking the commitment to live ethically imposes a distinctively aesthetic constraint on the life that one is to live: to live for the truth is to live a life characterized by *harmony* between one's convictions and one's actions.⁴

The emergence of this trend is best understood as the result of the combination of three factors. The first is the inherent difficulty in understanding Foucault's notion of the aesthetics of existence, which he invariably brought up when asked what form of ethics he thought appropriate for the present, but on which he elaborated surprisingly little. The second factor is the understandable but ultimately damaging impulse of defending Foucault from a potential objection, namely, that in suggesting that we should the answer the question how to live by thinking of ethical life as an aesthetic object, Foucault was irresponsibly making light of a serious matter. Such a worry was originally expressed by Hadot in *Reflections on the Notion of a "Culture of the Self."*⁵ But Hadot, a cautious reader and scholar, merely wrote that he was "a little bit afraid" that Foucault "might not be proposing an [ethics] that might be too aesthetic," and immediately added the further qualification that that possibility ought to be examined in more detail than he was in a position to do at that time and in that context. Other interpreters, less scrupulous than him, seem to have taken for granted that any charitable interpretation of Foucault's ethical views would require minimizing the aesthetic

3. Timothy O'Leary. *Foucault and the Art of Ethics*. Continuum Collection. Bloomsbury Academic, 2006.

4. Thomas Flynn. "Foucault as Parrhesiast: His Last Course at the College de France (1984)". In: *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 12.2-3 (1987), pp. 213-229.

5. Pierre Hadot. "Reflexions sur la notion de "culture de soi"". In: *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*. Paris: Albin, Michel, 1984, 1996, pp. 323-333, p. 331.

dimension of his ethical proposal. Yet this attempt at charity comes in one assumption too late, for it rests on the assumption that contrary to what Foucault seemed to believe, it is not possible to draw a parallel between the ethical and the aesthetic without making light of the former. The conjunction of these two first factors seems to lead scholars to seek interpretations of Foucault's ethical views that downplay the aesthetic dimension of the aesthetics of existence. This is when the third factor, the recent publication of the series of lectures that Foucault delivered at the *Collège de France* between 1970 and 1984, comes into play. In the final years of his career, when Foucault began to articulate his ethical views, he used the notion of *parrhesia* as the guiding thread for his lectures. This seems to afford those who seek to downplay the importance of the notion of the aesthetics of existence, and specially its aesthetic dimension, the means to carry out their project, for it seems to suggest that it was the notion of *parrhesia*, not of the aesthetics of existence, that was central to Foucault's ethical views.

And yet, it should be evident: one does a disservice to Foucault by trying to defend his ethical views (which one has not yet understood) from an objection (whose pertinence is merely hypothetical) by trying to downplay what he himself suggested was the key to his ethical position. For to insist, his statement in this regard is unequivocal: "At the heart of Western culture lies the difficulty of defining the link between the will to truth and the aesthetics of existence."⁶

Furthermore, any interpretation of Foucault's ethical views according to which the central idea of those views is that one must live for the truth leads directly into a paradox. For it would be paradoxical indeed if Foucault's considered answer to the question "How to live if I must face up to the fact that 'nothing is true'?" were: "I must live for the truth."⁷

6. Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984*, p. 190 (175).

7. Note that the fact that in the reformulation of the slogan, Foucault places the phrase "nothing is true" in scare-quotes cannot be relied upon to dispel the paradox. Not, at any rate, unless the scare-quotes are taken to work as a negation-sign, so that by raising the question "How to live if 'nothing is true'?" Foucault would have meant to raise the question "How to live given that there are truths?" And note furthermore that even then—even granting, for the sake of argument, that the most charitable interpretation of Foucault's

This is not to deny that there is an important place in Foucault’s ethical views for the notion of *parrhesia*, but only to point out that Foucault’s proposed revision of the formula of nihilism, as well as the subsequent challenge to define the link between ‘the will to truth’ and the aesthetics of existence, suggest that it is not possible to give an account of his ethical views without giving an account of his rejection of the original version of the nihilist slogan, of his understanding of ‘the will to truth’ and the closely related idea that there is a sense in which ‘nothing is true,’ and of the idea of an aesthetics of existence and its centrality to those views. These are the central interpretive questions of the dissertation, which has been structured accordingly.

1.2 The Structure of the Dissertation: Synoptic Overview

Part I of the dissertation consists of this single, introductory chapter. The topic of Part II is the idea that nothing is true, and its relation to the Nietzschean notion of a will to truth. Part III is an account of Foucault’s revised version of the nihilist slogan, of how the question “How to live if we must face up to the fact that ‘nothing is true’?” is to be understood if it is to capture something like the central problem of ethics today. Part IV is an explanation of Foucault’s notion of the aesthetics of existence: of how it is to be understood, of the motivation behind Foucault’s endorsement of it as a form of morality fit for the present, and of its relation to the idea of morality properly understood, rather than the broader practical question: how to live?

One of my main concerns in writing the dissertation has been to situate Foucault’s ethical views within the history of philosophy and within the contemporary landscape, while avoiding the pitfall of merely resorting to labels (virtue-ethicist, expressivist, Humean, de-

views comes at the cost of the claim that in reformulating the nihilist slogan, Foucault chose a formula that means the opposite of what he had in mind—even then, *parrhesia*-centered interpretations would remain problematic. For if one could plausibly sum up Foucault’s views by the principle that one must live for the truth, then his views, while not paradoxical, would seem rather uninteresting and unoriginal; they would seem indistinguishable from the view articulated and exemplified by the Socrates of the *Apology*, and endorsed by almost every ethicist in the Western tradition since.

ontologist, etc.) and settling for suggesting that Foucault is best understood as a partisan of one of the standard contemporary approaches. Thus, Part II is framed as a discussion of Nietzsche's influence on Foucault's change of attitude toward psychology and on the development of Foucault's intellectual project in the early 50s, and in Part III, after presenting Foucault's general framework for thinking about ethics (Chapter 5), I turn to a discussion of MacIntyre's criticism of Nietzschean approaches to ethics in general and of Foucault's version of Nietzscheanism in particular (Chapter 6).

1.3 The Structure of the Dissertation: Extended Overview of Parts II to V

1.3.1 Part II — Nietzschean Origins: The will to Truth

Part II of the dissertation is an exploration of Nietzsche's influence on Foucault's intellectual development. Guided by the widely acknowledged but seldom discussed fact that Foucault's reading of Nietzsche in the early 1950s was key in the development of his overall intellectual project, my central goal was to acquire a better understanding of Foucault's claim that 'nothing is true' and his use of the concepts of a 'will to truth' and a 'concern for the truth' in the context of the reformulation of the nihilist slogan through a close study of that early encounter with Nietzsche. In addition to these motivations, internal to my goals in the dissertation, this seemed to be a worthwhile project insofar as this early period of Foucault's career remains largely unexplored in the scholarship. Pursuing this line of enquiry turned out to be even more fruitful than I had foreseen.

The method that I employed is straightforward. It is well known that Foucault's reading of Nietzsche circa 1953 played an important role in the change undergone by his attitude towards psychology around that time. Thus I dedicated Chapter 2 of the dissertation (the first chapter of Part II) to a close study of the main features Foucault's attitude toward psychology before and after that change. Two texts from that period seemed particularly

well-suited for the purpose. The first was Foucault's first academic publication, the *Introduction* to Ludwig Binswanger's *Dream and Existence*, where Foucault gives expression to a somewhat ambivalent but ultimately enthusiastic attitude towards psychology. The second text was *Mental Illness and Personality*, Foucault's first book, an unstable work he later repudiated, fraught as it was with the tension between the favorable attitude toward psychology of the Binswanger text, and a proto-version of the mature, highly critical attitude towards it that he began to develop around 1952 under the influence of both postwar French Marxism and Nietzsche.

The results of this chapter, along with various interviews and texts from the late seventies and early eighties in which Foucault discusses his main influences in those early years, afforded the means to triangulate towards a more precise understanding of the Nietzschean influence on the development of his lifelong intellectual project in the early 1950s. That was the task of Chapters 3 and 4, the main results of which can be summarized as follows. The main reason that Nietzsche's influence on Foucault was possible was a pre-existent ethical commitment on Foucault's part to 'radically' break away from traditional ways of thinking and being. Nietzsche's work contained the resources to bring about that kind of change by furnishing the rudiments for a reconception of three conceptual anchoring points of tradition: the concepts of the commitment to pursue the truth, of history, and of subjectivity.

Truth, insofar as both at the individual and at the collective level, the pursuit of truth, the will to truth, is not always *only* guided, and almost or perhaps even never *primarily* guided, by a desire to know what is true. It is also guided by the will to power, the 'will' (arguably, the disposition) to preserve one's life and one's way of living, or to put it in terms that are less suggestive of a conspiratorial, deliberate and self-conscious will to mask the truth, the pursuit of truth is often guided by the tendency of discursive and social practices and institutions to perpetuate themselves. By bringing into view the possibility of considering truth as being partially an effect of power, Foucault's early reading of Nietzsche enabled him to develop an intellectual project that partly consisted in a 'critique of anthropological truths,' of putatively

transhistorical truths about human being, a project whose central methodological hypothesis would eventually become that truth is not independent of discursive and social practices for which it serves as a standard, but that it is, on the contrary, no less determined by those discursive and social practices than those practices are determined by the putatively true discourses on which they are grounded. Truth as partially an effect of power, as partially an effect of discursive and social practices from which it is purportedly independent, rather than as purely determined by the phenomena of which it is supposed to be the truth. Truth as a discursive practice, as a discursive game that serves as a vehicle for the imposition of systems of obligations.⁸

History was reconceptualized through the influence of Nietzsche in two ways. First, insofar as within Nietzsche's conception of history, historical change does not take the form of continuous rational progress toward an inevitable *telos*, but of an accidental and haphazard series of transformations and reconfigurations of historically local practices, transformations that in certain cases involve ruptures of varying degrees. Second, insofar as Nietzsche brought into view and provided examples of the idea of a critical history the task of which is to criticize those aspects of the historian's contemporary culture that seem obviously neces-

8. Throughout the dissertation, I deliberately avoid, to the extent that it is possible, reopening the dossier of Foucault's conception of truth and of a Foucauldian critique of truth. The reason is not that I think the topic has been exhausted, but that engaging it would require at least two additional dissertations. Let me just say that there is a hard distinction to be drawn between two issues that are often confused in discussions of 'Foucault's conception of truth': his critique of traditional concepts of truth within the European philosophical tradition, and his critique of traditional conceptions of the commitment to pursue and believe the truth within that same tradition. Although admittedly, fully developing and justifying these claims is beyond the scope of my aim here, my view is that Foucault embarked in both critical projects. His critique of the concept of truth can be understood as an attempt to criticize what we may think of 'transcendent conceptions of truth' in favor of 'immanent conceptions of truth,' where the former are conceptions of truth that run into, and would not be able to address, the epistemic variant of Eutyphro's problem: do we say that *p* is true because I believe it to be so, or do I believe it to be so because it is true? His critique of the concept of the commitment to pursue and believe the truth is a critique of the view that the pursuit of truth is ever or could ever be disinterested. The two critiques together can be taken to be Foucault's own variation on a perennial philosophical theme, the convergence between a pragmatist approach to belief formation and justification and a deflationist conception of truth. I hope the reader will excuse for these admittedly cryptic remarks, but the contemporary language and literature on truth, belief and justification are not Foucault's own, and a more clear translation between what are effectively disparate frameworks is, as I have been suggesting, well beyond the scope of my present aims. A more detailed discussion of Foucault's critiques of the concept of truth and of the commitment to the truth can be found in the Conclusion.

sary, whose rational legitimacy seems indisputable, by exposing their contingency and lack of rational foundation.

Subjectivity. A culture's conception of what it is to be a human subject is one of the anchoring points of the tradition from which it has sprung. A radical shift in mentality, a radical shift in the form of rationality, is only possible insofar as 'the' form of subjectivity that goes in hand with that mentality and that form of rationality is susceptible of change. Thus it was only if the form of subjectivity itself was revealed to be in some sense subject to historical change that the kind of rupture with traditional ways of thinking and being that seemed ethically and politically necessary to Foucault could appear to be so much as possible. And it is here, in connection with this aspect of the concept of subjectivity, that the work of Nietzsche also left a deep mark. Nietzsche's work brought into view the fact that even our conception of 'the' form of subjectivity, which informs the way we think about ourselves, the way we think about what we ought to think and how we ought to go about pursuing the truth, which informs the way we think about how we ought to live and about how we ought to treat one another—Nietzsche brought into view that 'the' form of subjectivity that determines 'the form of our experience' in general and of our ethical experience in particular, is itself subject to historical change. Under the Nietzschean influence, Foucault thus came to reconceive the form of subjectivity, no less than truth, as an effect of power, as an effect of the tendency of the practices and institutions at work in any given historical setting to perpetuate themselves by constituting individuals into subjects of particular, historically contingent but seemingly transhistorical and necessary types.

The central consequence of these three Nietzschean insights is that the claims that we take to serve as rational grounds for the norms that regulate our behavior, both towards others and towards our own selves, are liable to seem to us to be true on what may eventually turn out to be non-rational grounds. In particular, purportedly transhistorical claims about the nature of human being that are taken to serve as rational grounds for imposing norms of behavior on individuals are liable to seem true insofar as they afford the means to preserve

a dominant way of living (regardless of whether they are ‘rationally’ or ‘ethically’ justifiable in a more substantive sense⁹), and not because they are in fact true: they are liable to *be* means of domination disguised as bodies of disinterested, objective, merely factual claims that serve to ground political and ethical imperatives.

To put it differently, the reading of Nietzsche enabled Foucault to abandon a naive perspective from which norms of conduct seem to be grounded on transhistorical, objective truths about human subjects, and to adopt instead a critical conception from which historically contingent putative truths about what a human being is and about the systems of norms which those truths serve to ground mutually support each other. On the naive perspective, norms are grounded on truths. On the critical perspective, norms and truths mutually support each other. The consequence is not that from the critical perspective, neither truths nor norms can be rationally justifiable, but that any claim to the effect that a human being is in some sense defective, and that their being defective justifies treating them in a way contrary to how they wish to be treated, is, from an ethical perspective, profoundly dangerous. This danger requires that we actively adopt a critical stance with respect to any such normative claim. In the face of any norm whose application is liable to infringe upon any person’s freedom of self-determination, and in the face of any claim about human nature and human subjectivity that seems to justify it, our default stance ought not merely be one of passive and thus ‘putatively’ rational assent, but one of active rational critique. In light of this realization, Foucault dedicated his intellectual life to the pursuit of

9. ‘Rationally’ and ‘ethically’ in scare quotes because the idea is, in short, that what seems to us rationally or ethically necessary could in fact be rationally and ethically unjustifiable, and this could generate the following worry: If a norm seems rationally or ethically necessary to us, how could the idea that it is rationally or ethically unjustifiable even be intelligible? From whose perspective would we be entitled to worry that what seems necessary to us is ‘in fact’ contingent? — The worry disappears, and the scare quotes can be eliminated, as soon as we understand Foucault’s central insight about normativity. Claims about necessity are not claims that are made from a neutral perspective—the idea of a neutral perspective is in fact incoherent—they are always perspectival. To the extent that we do not choose the perspective that we begin with, but that we can at best undertake the commitment to hold it up to rational standards, the idea that what seems rationally or necessary to us might in fact be contingent is just the idea that although the fact that our perspective seems to us correct because it is ours, we’re committed to make it the case that it is ours because it is correct, by subjecting it to certain rational standards.

what he referred to as a historical critique of thought, where thought is to be understood as a threefold structure that comprises knowledge, norms, and the conception of what it is to be a person (a ‘subject’) operative in any given or imagined cultural setting. Put differently, Foucault dedicated his intellectual life to the pursuit of a ‘historical critique of the present,’ of the general perspective that dominates and informs the way we treat one another and, in particular, the decisions that we collectively make to justify treating individuals and groups in ways that they do not wish to be treated or would not wish to be treated if alternative, and from their own perspective preferable, ways of being treated were brought into their purview.

In this way, Foucault’s felt need for a radical break with tradition, and the Nietzschean influence in bringing into view the possibility, if not of a radical break with tradition, at least of a shift away from tradition—in brief, Foucault’s felt need, in the early 1950s, for the conquest of a certain degree of independence from tradition, and how this need opened the way and informed the Nietzschean influence, was the topic of Chapter 3. The work of the chapter reveals that one of the central strands of Foucault’s intellectual project, and one of particular importance for his ethical view, is his reconceptualization of subjectivity. Thus it seemed fruitful to enquire closely into the development of the centerpiece of Foucault’s account of subjectivity, the idea that the specific forms of subjectivity distinctive of any particular historical setting are the result of processes of ‘subjectivation’ whereby individuals come to be constituted into subjects through their participation in the practices that make up the social fabric in their historical setting. That was the topic Chapter 4, the last chapter of the second part of the dissertation.

1.3.2 Part III — Foucault’s Ethical Framework as a Response to the Nihilist Challenge: Critique and The Form of Moral Conduct

The second part of the dissertation lay the ground for a clarification of Foucault’s ethical views through the consideration of their situation within Foucault’s overall intellectual

project. The study of the notion of subjectivation, of processes whereby individuals come to be constituted as *subjects* carried out in Chapter 4 paved the way for an enquiry into the constitution of individuals as distinctively *ethical* subjects. Thus Part III is a close study of the conceptual framework that Foucault developed for thinking about ethics, and in particular, of what he introduced as a framework for describing various historically realized ‘forms of moral conduct,’ the different ways in which individuals have been called on to constitute themselves as ethical subjects.

Chapter 5 begins with a close consideration of Foucault’s characterization of the form of moral conduct. This reveals, as indicated above, that the centerpiece of the idea of the form of moral conduct is the concept of ethical subjectivation or self-constitution; processes whereby individuals are constituted into ethical subjects; processes, procedures and practices whereas individuals come to establish a certain relationship to themselves insofar as they are ethical subjects. But Foucault’s conception of moral conduct generates a worry. The realization that the kind of subjects that we are, and in fact the form of our experience in general, is by and large determined by processes and procedures that lie beyond the purview of any individual’s rational control seems to threaten the possibility of genuinely free action. The fact that we are, for the most part, passively constituted into the kinds of subjects that we are, the fact, furthermore, that even if we actively undertake the project of freely constituting ourselves as autonomous subjects, in doing so, we can only rely on our already constituted form of subjectivity, suggests that all forms of self-constitution or subjectivation are ultimately passive, mere effects of power. If the self of “self-constitution” has been passively brought into being by processes of subjectivation over which the individual has no rational control, then self-constitution would seem to be not an expression of autonomy, but yet another mechanism for subjecting individuals to normative constraints, yet another vector for the exercise of power. The voices uttering “I will” would be but echoes of the superstructures that taught them what to will, and how to will it, and for what reasons. Thus, after presenting Foucault’s conception of the form of moral conduct, Chapter 5 turns to an examination of

this problem and of Foucault's response to it. The result is a contrast between on the one hand, traditional, robust or 'purist,' and on the other hand, non-traditional, minimalist, or 'perspectivist' conceptions of rationality and critique, and a corresponding distinction between two conceptions of freedom: as an innate capacity for self-determination, and as an achievement that may result from of an active and sustained effort to constitute oneself as an autonomous subject.

Chapter 6 is an examination of the relation between Foucault and Alasdair MacIntyre's ethical views, and of the latter's objection to Foucault's philosophical method. MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, first published in 1983, is an attempt to diagnose the failure of philosophical ethical discourse of the time in accounting for the existence of ethical commitments, principles and values in the post-Enlightenment world, and to provide a solution for this perceived crisis in ethical discourse. The project is of particular interest within the consideration of Foucault's ethical views. On the one hand, there is substantive overlap between MacIntyre's and Foucault's views about the importance of history for understanding our contemporary ethical experience, between their views about the relationship between tradition and that experience, and between their diagnoses of our contemporary ethical experience by reference to *nihilism*. On the other hand, there are also substantive differences both in their understanding of what historical enquiry consists in, and in their positive ethical proposals. MacIntyre advocates the need to rely on ethical tradition, and suggests that the pitfalls of this paradigmatically conservative stance be avoided through the adoption of a critical stance. Foucault, as we saw, acknowledges the inevitability of relying on tradition (he eventually even came to warn against any attempt to carry out a global and radical rupture with it). But from his perspective, while relying on tradition is inevitable, the attitude to have towards tradition is one of suspicion rather than one of endorsement. The goal of the kind of sustained practice of critique recommended by Foucault is not to merely to ward off the dangers of a tradition that is to be preserved unless it proves to be reprehensible 'from within,' but to render ourselves

autonomous from our tradition.¹⁰ Where MacIntyre sees post-Enlightenment rationalism as a threat, and reliance of tradition as the solution, Foucault sees tradition as an ethical and political danger, and post-Enlightenment rational critique as the solution. Finally, in addition to the proximity between MacIntyre and Foucault's projects, MacIntyre's work is of relevance to the consideration of Foucault's ethical views insofar as the central chapter of *After Virtue* is dedicated to a refutation of Nietzschean approaches to ethics in favor of a traditional, Aristotelian alternatives, and insofar as in *Three Forms of Rationality* MacIntyre attempts a criticism of Nietzschean rationality by an criticism of Foucault, who he regards as the proponent of the most sophisticated version of Nietzscheanism available. As I argue in Chapter 6 based on the results of the preceding chapter, the substantive discrepancy between MacIntyre's and Foucault's ethical proposals in spite of the closeness of their approaches is rooted in the differences between their respective conceptions of subjectivity, rationality, freedom and critique.

1.3.3 Part IV — Foucault's Ethical Commitments: The Will to Truth and the Aesthetics of Existence

The final part of the body of the dissertation, consisting in a single chapter, is the clarification of Foucault's ethical views through a clarification of the content of the notion of the aesthetics of existence. My strategy was to clarify the content of the notion of the aesthetics of existence by showing its relation to the main themes, concepts and problems developed and addressed by Foucault in the course of his career, with a particular focus on his work on ethics from 1978 onwards. The notion of the aesthetics of existence, I argue, is meant to provide an alternative to three central and complementary features of a traditional way of thinking about ethics which according to Foucault is in the course of disappearing: (1) a morality of obedience to a code of laws that is intricately connected in with (2) a particular general theory of human

10. Where to be autonomous relative to one's tradition is not necessarily to reject it, but to not take for granted that it is acceptable wholesale, and that there are no better alternatives.

being, and (3) a corresponding conception of a set of truth-related practices, of ‘acts of truth’ such that by partaking in them, the individual constitutes herself at once as the active source of truths about herself, and as a the passive subject of a set of norms and practices that she must obey by virtue of those truths. One of the central structural features of this traditional way of thinking, and what has made it particularly *compelling*, is that the subject is led to formulate and produce a set of truths about herself that reveal that the reason that she must comply with the corresponding set of norms is that it is *in her best interests* to do so. On Foucault’s view, this traditional form of morality is disappearing as a result of a complex set of historical transformations that has undermined its doctrinal foundation and rendered its mode of subjection (i.e. of the individual’s conception of the their relation to the moral code), ‘obedience,’ void of any binding force. The reason that Foucault advocated the aesthetics of existence is thus that it seemed to him to provide the most plausible and appealing alternative to this traditional form of moral conduct. The aesthetics of existence is best understood as a form of undertaking the ethical care of ourselves, of undertaking our ethical self-constitution as autonomous subjects, that does not rely on a conception of human nature according to which there is a universal human telos which we would be under a metaphysically bound or obligated to realize. The aesthetics of existence, as a form of self-constitution, is oriented instead toward the free and active constitution of ourselves by ourselves as autonomous subjects through our engagement in the project of lending our lives an ethically beautiful form and through the sustained practice of critique.

In the Conclusion, I address a certain number of questions related to the role of truth within Foucault’s ethical views. I begin by distinguishing between two types of questions that one may raise in this regard: whether and in what sense Foucault sought to get *completely* rid of the traditional conception of truth, and what Foucault’s views were about the status of truths about human being in general as the source of the binding force of norms of conduct. With respect to the first question, taking Bouveresses’ recent book on Foucault, *Nietzsche*

contre Foucault,¹¹ as a case-study, I describe a somewhat widespread tendency to think of Foucault as someone sought to 'completely get rid of' the notion of truth, and argue that this is a misrepresentation of Foucault's views about truth. I then turn to the question that is more relevant to fully understanding Foucault ethical views, whether truths about human being can count as grounds for universal ethical claims, and answer it in the negative. On Foucault's view, it is not the case that there are claims or truths about human being that could ground the necessity for every human being to comply with a particular norm, since on his view, even the commitment to assent to the truth is to be understood as dependent on the commitment to constitute oneself as a subject of a certain kind, as a participant in a certain *regime of truth*. This, ultimately, is the sense in which, according to Foucault, 'nothing is true' in the reformulation of the nihilist slogan: nothing is true that could, on its own, impose a constraint of which it could be correctly said that every individual ought to pursue it regardless of her various commitments and beliefs.

11. Jacques Bouveresse. *Nietzsche contre Foucault. Sur la vérité, la connaissance et le pouvoir*. Marseille: Agone, 2016.

Part II

Nietzschean Origins

THE STANDARD STORY

In the early years of his career, Foucault flirted with the idea of becoming a psychologist, or a psychiatrist, or at any rate a psychological scientist of sorts. He pursued formal studies in psychology. He even worked at hospitals with leading psychiatrists and real patients. Then something happened. He changed his mind. Radically enough to decide to write a book that would become one of the foundational texts of the anti-psychology movement in the French sixties: *The History of Madness*. But what happened? The details of this part of the story are less clear. There are various versions. One such version goes like follows: He'd read Bataille, he'd read Blanchot, he'd read Freud... Then he read Nietzsche. It was a shock. Foucault somehow came to understand that the psychological sciences were not sciences, perhaps because in order to attain that status, a science must have a well-defined object, and the psychological sciences lacked one: mental illness, it turned out, was not a natural type, and consequently it could not be an appropriate object of scientific research. Thus goes a version the standard story.

I call this kind of story 'standard' because I am convinced that it is representative of a widespread conception of the development of Foucault's thought. But my conviction, I should note, is not the conviction that many or most Foucault scholars would actively defend or even openly endorse this or any particular version of the story. It is rather the conviction that most of us tend to passively accept some version of it, some version, that is, of a story according to which: (1) early on in his career, Foucault had a favorable attitude toward psychology; (2) at some point in the early fifties he read Nietzsche; (3) this reading marked a turning point in Foucault's career and led, among other things, to a substantive change in his attitude toward psychology.

The problem with the standard story is not that it is false. In fact, its origin probably lies in a few statements by Foucault himself and by some of his closest interlocutors, as well as by the narrative in Didier Eribon's influential biography¹²:

12. In addition to the passages below, see (Maurice Pinguet. "Les Années d'apprentissage". In: *Le débat* 4.41 [1986]), (Didier Eribon. *Michel Foucault : 1926-1984*. Paris: Flammarion, c1989.).

Nietzsche a été une révélation pour moi. Je l'ai lu avec beaucoup de passion, et j'ai rompu avec ma vie, quitté mon emploi à l'hôpital psychiatrique, quitté la France: j'avais le sentiment d'avoir été piégé. A travers Nietzsche, j'étais devenu étranger à toutes ces choses.^{13,14}

J'ai commencé par lire Hegel, puis Marx, et je me suis mis à lire Heidegger en 1951 ou 1952; et en 1953 ou 1952, je ne me souviens plus, j'ai lu Nietzsche. [...] c'est Nietzsche qui l'a emporté [...]. J'avais essayé de lire Nietzsche dans les années cinquante, mais Nietzsche tout seul ne me disait rien! Tandis que Nietzsche et Heidegger, ça a été le choc philosophique!^{15,16}

If the standard story is based in Foucault's own recollections, what could be the problem with it? The problem is that while it is not false, it is vague and incomplete. Accepting it gives us the illusion that there are no interesting questions to be raised in regard to Foucault's early engagement in psychology and his reading of Nietzsche in the early fifties; it keeps us from delving more deeply into the host of questions about the early years of Foucault's career that it seems to settle. For instance, that some version of this story is passively accepted by most may perhaps explain the surprisingly little attention that Foucault's early work on psychology has received in the secondary literature.¹⁷ It may also explain the striking

13. Michel Foucault. "Vérité, pouvoir et soi". In: *Dits et écrits*. Gallimard, 1982, 2001. Chap. 362, pp. 1596–1602, p. 1599.

14. "Nietzsche was a revelation for me. I read him passionately, and I broke up with my life, left my job at the psychiatric hospital, left France: I had the feeling of having been trapped. Through Nietzsche, I became foreign to all these things" (Michel Foucault. "Truth, power, self: An interview with Michel Foucault". In: *Technologies of the Self* [1988], pp. 9–15, p. 11). Here and in what follows, unless otherwise noted, I translate.

15. Michel Foucault. "Le retour de la morale". In: *Dits et écrits*. Vol. II. Gallimard, 1984, 2001. Chap. 354, pp. 1515–1526, p. 1522.

16. "I began by reading Hegel, then Marx, and I began reading Heidegger in 1951 or 1952; and in 1953 or 1952, et en 1953 ou 1952, I can't remember anymore, I read Nietzsche. [...] But I acknowledge that it was Nietzsche who prevailed [...]. I had tried to read Nietzsche in the fifties, but Nietzsche on his own did not speak to me! While Nietzsche and Heidegger, that was quite the philosophical shock!" (Michel Foucault. "The Return of Morality". In: *Foucault Live: (interviews, 1961-1984)*. Semiotext(e), 1984, 1996. Chap. 24, pp. 317–332, p. 28)

17. Three noteworthy exceptions are Pierre Macherey's well-known (Pierre Macherey. "Aux sources de

absence of any detailed discussion of the influence of Nietzsche on Foucault's change of attitude toward psychology in the early fifties, even in the context of works whose topic is Nietzsche's influence of Foucault's work, and the development of Foucault's criticism of philosophical anthropology and the human or social sciences in general.¹⁸

But what do we stand to gain by delving deeper into these issues? Given that Foucault went on to write a large volume on the *History of Madness*, and that we thus have a clear conception (or at least the resources for forming one) of his considered attitude, why look closely at the views that he abandoned? What reason is there to reopen the research dossier on the 'early articles on psychology' given that, as a result of his reading of Nietzsche, Foucault gave up the views that he put forth in those articles?

My aim is not to dispute the uncontroversial: that Foucault's interest in knowledge on the scientific accounts of psychological phenomena during the late forties and early fifties was strong enough to move him to read avidly on the topic, to pursue formal studies in psychology, to work with patients at the *Hôpital de Saint-Anne*,¹⁹ to attend Lacan's lectures at the same time,²⁰ to write and translate articles and books about psychology.²¹ The strength of his interest in psychological phenomena *and in the nature and status of knowledge of psychological phenomena* can indeed hardly be overemphasized. But at the same time, it seems to me that we cannot even understand what it means to say that Foucault was interested in knowledge of psychological phenomena, what it is that changed

l'histoire de la folie: une rectification et ses limites". In: *Critique* XLII.471-472 [1986], pp. 753–774), Hubert Dreyfus' foreword to (Michel Foucault. *Mental illness and psychology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), and Giuseppe Bianco's recent. (Giuseppe Bianco. "La dialectique bavarde et le cercle anthropologique: Michel Foucault et Jean Hyppolite". In: *Jean Hyppolite, entre structure et existence*. Rue d'Ulm, 2014, pp. 1–2)

18. See, for instance, (Babette Babich. "A Philosophical Shock: Foucault Reading Nietzsche, Reading Heidegger". In: *Foucault's Legacy*. New York: Continuum [2009]), (Hans Sluga. "Foucault's encounter with Heidegger and Nietzsche". In: *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*. Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 210–239) and (Hans Sluga. "I am Simply a Nietzschean". In: *Foucault and Philosophy* [2010], pp. 36–59).

19. Eribon, *Michel Foucault : 1926-1984*, p. 62.

20. Eribon, *Michel Foucault : 1926-1984*, p. 60-64.

21. Michel Foucault. "Introduction à 'Le rêve et l'existence' de Ludwig Binswanger". In: *Dits et écrits*. Vol. I. Gallimard, 1954, 2001. Chap. 1, pp. 93–147.

Foucault's mind about it, what it is that he experienced as a philosophical shock upon reading Nietzsche, before we get clearly into view the kind of knowledge of psychological phenomena that interested Foucault and the nature of that interest. Even by adding the qualification that Foucault's interest was as much *in the nature and status of knowledge of psychological phenomena* as it was in the content of psychology, we've already introduced an important alteration to the standard story: the intern who works at a psychiatric institution in order to study patients and learn the psychiatric trade is, after all, engaged in a considerably different project than the intern who is there observing and analyzing the practices of psychiatrists no less than the behavior of their patients. Much like the supervisor who surveys the well-functioning of the prison is engaged in a different project than the genealogist or the activist who study the incarceration system in order to criticize it...

To sum up, the standard story is built around three putative facts: that early on in his career, Foucault had a favorable attitude toward psychology; that early on in the fifties, Foucault studied Nietzsche's work rather closely; finally, that this lead to a substantive change in his attitude toward psychology. One problem with this picture is that it is somewhat inaccurate. The main problem is that it is incomplete. In accepting it, we render ourselves blind to what is most interesting and illuminating in this period of Foucault's career, and not only from the perspective of scholarship, but also from a philosophical perspective. We render ourselves blind, that is, not just to the basic facts that map out the early development of Foucault's career, but also to the philosophical queries and assumptions that informed his attitude and views. What is most interesting of this period of Foucault's career is not just that Foucault's early attitude psychology was ambivalent from the outset, or that reading Nietzsche somehow lead him to generalize a pre-existing partial suspicion toward psychology. What is interesting is rather the host of questions that this raises. They can be organized into three groups, corresponding to the three basic facts around which the standard story is built.

1. What motivated Foucault's early suspicion toward psychology, but also why was it that

for a certain time, this suspicion was only partial. In other words: what was Foucault's conception of goal of psychology, so that he could at once think that scientific and clinical psychology were unable to attain it, while existential analysis could?

2. How could reading Nietzsche alter his understanding of that goal and of existential analysis, so as to convince him that even existential analysis would not enable him to attain that goal? And in addition, and still in connection with the encounter with Nietzsche: what were the specific Nietzschean insights that brought about that shift in his view?
3. Corresponding to the third fact: What, exactly, was the end-point of that shift? Did Foucault merely abandon his original goal along with the idea that existential analysis could help him attain it or did he simply continue to pursue that original goal, albeit through a different approach? In the latter case: What exactly was that approach? In the former: What did the new goal consist in?

The purpose of the next two chapters is to answer these sets of questions. There is, however, a methodological obstacle. There are currently almost no (available) sources directly documenting the motivation, approach or consequences of Foucault's study of Nietzsche on 1952-53. I propose to circumvent this obstacle by focusing, initially, on the answers to the first and third sets of questions, and then triangulate in order to answer the second set of questions. Accordingly, in the next chapter (Chapter 2) I will identify, on the basis of Foucault's earliest publications on psychology,²² both his initial attitude toward it, and his attitude toward psychology after the Nietzschean turn. In Chapter 3, building on Jacques

22. The *Introduction to Ludwig Binswanger's Dream and Existence* (Foucault, "Introduction à 'Le rêve et l'existence' de Ludwig Binswanger"), *Psychology from 1850 to 1950* (Michel Foucault. "La psychologie de 1850 à 1950". In: *Dits et écrits*. Vol. I. Gallimard, 1954, 2001. Chap. 2, pp. 148–165), *Scientific Research in Psychology* (Michel Foucault. "La recherche scientifique et la psychologie". In: *Dits et écrits*. Vol. I. Gallimard, 1957, 2001. Chap. 2, pp. 165–186), and *Mental Illness and Personality* (Michel Foucault. *Maladie mentale et personnalité*. PUF, 1954), and to a lesser extent, on the *The History of Madness* (Michel Foucault. *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique; folie et déraison*. Paris: Plon, 1961) and *Mental Illness and Psychology* (Michel Foucault. *Maladie mentale et psychologie*. Quadrige (Paris. 1981). Paris: PUF, 2010).

Lagrange's notes on a course pronounced by Foucault at the ENS in 1953,²³ on Foucault's own retrospective accounts of the beginning of his intellectual career,²⁴ and on the results of Chapter 2, I will determine the specificity of the Nietzschean influence on Foucault's intellectual project by asking what are the central elements and themes of Nietzsche's thought that could have brought about the transition from Foucault's initial attitude toward psychology, to the attitude that he adopted after the 'philosophical shock' of reading Nietzsche.

23. Judging by Lagrange's notes, the longest segment of the course, entitled "Problems of Anthropology," was dedicated to 'Nietzschean anthropology,' with 'Kantian anthropology' as the runner-up. And no less interestingly, as we shall see, the course culminates with a segment on Karl Jaspers' work on philosophical anthropology.

24. I will rely primarily, although not exclusively, on Foucault's interview with Ducio Trombadori (Michel Foucault. "Entretien avec Michel Foucault (par D. Trombadori)". In: *Dits et écrits*. Vol. II. Gallimard, 1978, 2001. Chap. 281, pp. 860–914).

CHAPTER 2

THE SHIFT IN FOUCAULT'S ATTITUDE TOWARD PSYCHOLOGY IN THE EARLY 1950S

In this chapter, I'll set the stage for a study of Nietzsche's influence on Foucault by a close study of Foucault's change of attitude towards the psychological sciences in the early fifties. The goal of the first section is to determine what Foucault's attitude toward psychology was prior to the encounter with Nietzsche in 1953. In the second section, I will consider Foucault's attitude toward psychology immediately after the encounter with Nietzsche.

2.1 Existential Analysis and the Critique of Naturalistic Psychology

The goal of this section is to bring into view Foucault's conception of psychology and his attitude toward it prior to the so-called encounter with Nietzsche. For this purpose, Foucault's *Introduction to Binswanger's Dream and Existence*¹ is the best starting point. Not only is it Foucault's first publication; not only does it constitute, having been written by April 1953,² an ideal source for understanding Foucault's working conception of psychology right before the Nietzschean turn took place. In addition, in the *Introduction to Binswanger's Dream and Existence* Foucault explicitly attempts to draw the layout of the scientific and academic study of psychology of his time and to situate Binswanger's existential analysis within it. By having a close look at some passages of that text, we will be able to understand Foucault's conception of the psychology of his time, his attitude towards it, and the assumptions informing that attitude.

2.1.1 *Existential Analysis as the True Psychology*

Foucault's central aim in the *Introduction to Binswanger's Dream and Existence* is to capitalize on Binswanger's work in order to show that mental illness is one of the fundamental possibilities of 'human existence.' The interest in showing this does not lie in the idea that

1. Foucault, "Introduction à 'Le rêve et l'existence' de Ludwig Binswanger".

2. Eribon, *Michel Foucault : 1926-1984*, pp. 64-65.

mental illness is a *human* possibility, but in the idea that it is a possibility of human *existence*, in showing that it is an *existential possibility*. This idea situates what was then (and still is) commonly thought of as a distinctively psychological and empirical question (i.e. a scientific and medical question) within the existentialist, phenomenological framework that Binswanger inherited from Heidegger.³

To say that mental illness is a possibility of human *existence* is to deny that it is merely a possibility of human *nature*. Binswanger's idea, endorsed by Foucault, is that mental illness is not, contrary to what the psychiatrists of his (and our) time would say, merely a *natural-objective* phenomenon, but rather an *existential* and hence at least in part an *irreducibly subjective* phenomenon, a phenomenon that cannot be understood without reference to the experience of the mentally ill individual, and which consists in the manifestation of "that movement of existence that founds its historicity at the very moment in which it (i.e. existence) temporalizes itself."⁴ Foucault's central aim in the *Introduction* to Binswanger's text is to show that contrary to the prevalent view in the psychology of his time, mental illness is fundamentally not a natural or objective phenomenon but an existential one.

But what exactly is it to say, of mental illness, that it is an existential phenomenon? As I just noted, the simplest way to put it is to say that for a French intellectual in the early fifties to characterize something (e.g. mental illness) as an existential phenomenon is to say that it can be understood in existential, that is Heideggerian, terms. For Foucault to say that mental illness is an existential phenomenon is for him to say that the phenomenon of mental illness can be traced back to, understood and explained through the conceptual apparatus introduced by Heidegger in *Being and Time*.⁵ And while admittedly a simplification, it is

3. For the Heideggerian origins of Binswanger's approach to psychology in general, and psychoanalysis in particular, see (Ludwig Binswanger. *Being-in-the-world: Selected papers of Ludwig Binswanger*. Basic books, 1963), in particular (Ludwig Binswanger. "Heidegger's analytic of existence and its meaning for psychiatry". In: *Being-in-the-world: Selected papers of Ludwig Binswanger*. Ed. by Jacob Needleman. Basic books, 1963, pp. 216–221).

4. Foucault, "Introduction à 'Le rêve et l'existence' de Ludwig Binswanger", p. 137.

5. In this regard, Foucault's view is not distinct from, but on the contrary, heavily influenced by, Binswanger's own views about psychological phenomena as expounded, for instance, in his: *Heidegger's Analytic*

not inaccurate to say that the central thesis of Foucault's *Introduction* is that mental illness is the concrete, historical manifestation of an inauthentic existence:

Quand l'existence est vécue sur le mode de l'inauthenticité, elle ne devient pas à la manière de l'histoire. Elle se laisse absorber dans l'histoire intérieure de son délire ou encore sa durée s'épuise toute entière dans le devenir des choses; elle s'abandonne à ce déterminisme objectif où s'aliène totalement sa liberté originare. Et, dans un cas comme dans l'autre, l'existence vient d'elle-même et de son propre mouvement s'inscrire dans ce déterminisme de la maladie [...].^{6,7}

The goal of Foucault's first publication was thus to show that the concept of mental illness belongs to *the order of existence* that is the object of existential analysis, rather than to *the objective order of nature* that is the object of psychiatric discourse. This is key for understanding Foucault's early attitude toward psychology, and the way in which his first reading of Nietzsche transformed this attitude. It reveals that from the very outset, Foucault was driven by a hostile attitude towards the mainstream approaches to psychology, and a concomitant conviction that the subject-matter of psychology lends itself to a different approach and a different discourse than those prevalent at the time⁸:

[L]'existence vient d'elle-même et de son propre mouvement s'inscrire dans ce déterminisme de la maladie, où le psychiatre voit la vérification de son diagnostic, et par lequel il se croit justifié à considérer la maladie comme la chose

of *Existence and Its Meaning for Psychiatry* (Binswanger, "Heidegger's analytic of existence and its meaning for psychiatry") and *Freud's Conception of Man in the Light of Anthropology* (Ludwig Binswanger. "Freud's Conception of Man in the Light of Anthropology". In: *Being-in-the-world: Selected papers of Ludwig Binswanger*. Ed. by Jacob Needleman. Basic books, 1963, pp. 149–181).

6. Foucault, "Introduction à 'Le rêve et l'existence' de Ludwig Binswanger", pp. 136-137.

7. "When existence is lived in the mode of inauthenticity, its becoming is not historical becoming. It either lets itself be absorbed in the internal history of its delirium, or its duration in time exhausts itself in the becoming of things; it abandons itself to that objective determinism where its ordinary freedom is exhausted. And in one case as in the other, existence comes by itself and through its own movement to inscribe itself in the determinism of illness" (Michel Foucault. "Dream, imagination and existence." In: *Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry* 1 [1984], pp. 29–78).

8. For Foucault's account and violent critique of the institutional marginalization of psychoanalysis and non-scientific psychology in his time see (Foucault, "La recherche scientifique et la psychologie").

inerte où se déroule ce processus selon son déterminisme interne. Le psychiatre oublie que c'est l'existence elle-même qui constitue cette histoire naturelle de la maladie comme forme inauthentique de son historicité, et ce qu'il décrit comme la réalité en soi de la maladie n'est qu'un instantané pris sur ce mouvement de l'existence qui fonde son historicité au moment même où elle se temporalise.^{9,10}

From Foucault's perspective in 1952, psychiatry cannot provide an adequate understanding of mental illness. On the contrary, by placing it on the natural-objective register of deterministic processes rather than on the existential register where it properly belongs, it misrepresents it from the very outset. Accordingly, it is only by tracing mental illness back to the existential register from which it purportedly springs that mental illness could be adequately understood. And needless to say, this is precisely the type of procedure developed by Binswanger and further explored and enthusiastically advocated by Foucault in the *Introduction to Binswanger's Dream and Existence*. Insofar as it alone can, from the existential analyst's perspective, yield a complete understanding of psychological phenomena, it is this approach acquires a privileged status. Existential psychology is, for the Foucault of 1953, the true psychology.

2.1.2 *The Insufficiency of Scientific Psychology*

We have been considering the motivation behind Foucault's rejection of scientific psychology. He rejects it on grounds that it leaves out of consideration the existential dimension of mental phenomena. But if one were to ask a scientific psychologist, then or now, whether the fact that mental illness is studied from a purely naturalist and objective perspective constitutes

9. Foucault, "Introduction à 'Le rêve et l'existence' de Ludwig Binswanger", p. 137.

10. "Existence comes by itself and through its own movement to inscribe itself in the determinism of illness, where the psychiatrist finds the verification of his diagnosis, and through which he takes himself to be justified in considering the illness as the inert thing in which a process unfolds through its own internal determinism. The psychiatrist forgets that it is existence itself that constitutes this natural history of illness as the inauthentic form of its historicity, and what he describes as the reality in itself of illness is but a snapshot taken of that movement of existence that grounds its historicity at the moment in which it temporalizes itself" (Foucault, "Dream, imagination and existence.").

a problem, the answer would no doubt be negative. So why did this seem to be a problem to Foucault? What were Foucault's assumptions, and what was his goal, so that he could at once think that scientific and clinical psychology were unable to attain it, and that existential analysis could?

The *Introduction* to Binswanger's text also enables us to answer these questions. Foucault characterizes the psychological sciences in terms of their method, the level of analysis on which they operate, and their goal: their method is experimental, they focus and operate on the natural-causal register of deterministic processes, their goal is the explanation, in natural-causal terms, of the manifestations of psychological phenomena in the natural-causal order. What motivates Foucault's suspicion of scientific approaches to psychology and also explains why that suspicion is only partial is the conviction that the scientific approaches leave the *experience* of the subject out of consideration.

But what is it for an approach to a certain phenomenon to leave experience out of consideration? And why is that problematic? Here we must distinguish between a broad and a narrow sense of the phrase "the experience of an individual." In the *broad* sense, the experience of an individual refers to the *whole series of experiences* that that individual undergoes. Calling that series of mental episodes "experience" is just a way of focusing our attention on the 'internal' aspect of those episodes: on 'what it is like' for the individual to live through them. In this broad sense, that an individual is conscious during a period of time is enough to authorize talk about that individual's experience. There is no further requirement that the experiential *content* of those mental episodes has to meet in order for the series that they form to be called "experience." More precisely, there is no requirement about the structural features of the content of those experiences, or about the type of unity among them as a result of those structural features. That the individual has experiences at all, regardless of how much or little unity there is among those experiences, and how much or little those experiences 'make sense,' is enough to warrant talk about that individual's experience in this first, broad sense of the term. On the *narrow* sense of the term, "the experience of an

individual” designates not just a series of mental events, but a series of mental events *whose content has certain structural features and among which there is, correspondingly, a certain type of unity*. Thus while in the broad sense of the term, any series of conscious states of an individual may be referred to as the experience of that individual, in the strict sense, only a series of conscious states whose content has a certain type of unity may genuinely be referred to as an experience.

With this distinction in view, we are in a position to see what it means to say that scientific psychology left the experiential dimension of mental illness out of consideration and why that seemed problematic. This, in turn, will help us bring more clearly into view what the Foucault of the *Introduction to Binswanger’s Dream and Existence* took to be the goal of psychology.

As we saw in the last section, Foucault’s suspicion of scientific psychology was rooted in the observation that the latter left the experience of madness out of consideration. Naturally, the concern was not that the method, register of analysis and goal of scientific psychology left out of consideration the mentally ill patient’s experience *in the broad sense of the term*; the patient’s reports of their own experiences were certainly part of the data that made scientific research, diagnosis and treatment possible. The concern was rather that scientific psychology leaves out of consideration the experience of the mentally ill patient in the narrow sense of the term: the scientific psychologist does not see the content of the mental life of the patient as having the type of unity that makes it recognizable as an experience (in the narrow sense). From the perspective of the scientific psychologist, achieving the goal of psychological practice, which is simply to restore that type of unity to the mentally ill patient’s mental life, does not involve any effort to understand the type of unity characteristic of the experience of the mentally ill patient. And this seemed problematic to Foucault for three main and closely related reasons: a theoretical, a therapeutic, and an ethical and political one.

The theoretical reason is, simply put, that from Foucault’s perspective, scientific psychologist got the facts wrong. As we have seen, for the Foucault of the *Introduction to*

Binswanger's Dream and Existence, mental illness is the expression of the inauthentic life of an individual whose personal history has led her *experience* to acquire a certain configuration, one that keeps the individual from integrating her life into her social environment and instead leads her either to find refuge in the delirious history of her inner life, or to reduce herself to the status of a mere natural object among others. To cite a key passage of the *Introduction* again:

Quand l'existence est vécue sur le mode de l'inauthenticité, elle ne devient pas à la manière de l'histoire. Elle se laisse absorber dans l'histoire intérieure de son délire ou encore sa durée s'épuise toute entière dans le devenir des choses; elle s'abandonne à ce déterminisme objectif où s'aliène totalement sa liberté originelle.^{11,12}

Thus, from Foucault's perspective, the goal of psychology is not to produce a natural-objective description of the mechanisms of mental illness, which description would make it possible to classify different mental illnesses and to intervene in those processes in order to eliminate symptoms. The goal of psychology is rather to understand mental illness in terms of the distinctive forms of the experiences of mentally ill patients. So it is only by understanding *the experience* of mental illness that it is possible to understand both how every mental illness, with its distinctive behavioral traits and forms, is ultimately rooted in the concrete form of the singular experience of the mentally ill individual, and the relation of that concrete form to the universal *a priori* structures of human existence that are the topic of an analytic of *Dasein*. From this perspective, the experience (narrow) of the mentally ill patient is indissociable from the illness itself. To be mentally ill just is to have an experience of a distinctive kind, an experience characterized by a distinctive type of unity. So to think

11. Foucault, "Introduction à 'Le rêve et l'existence' de Ludwig Binswanger", pp. 136-137.

12. "When existence is lived in the mode of inauthenticity, its becoming is not historical becoming. It either lets itself be absorbed in the internal history of its delirium, or its duration in time exhausts itself in the becoming of things; it abandons itself to that objective determinism where its originary freedom is exhausted" (Foucault, "Dream, imagination and existence.").

that it is possible to develop a psychological science while leaving the experience of the patient out of consideration is to misunderstand the nature of the object of psychological research.

This has an immediate and closely connected *therapeutic* implication, Foucault's second reason for finding the neglect of the experiential dimension of mental illness by scientific psychology suspect. From the perspective just described, it is not possible to understand, diagnose and treat a given mental illness unless the experience of the mentally ill individual is understood as an experience in the narrow sense. Accordingly, contrary to the scientific psychologist's assumption, the experience of the mentally ill patient, its unity, its structure and the internal logic that governs it, are as essential for psychological therapeutic practice as they are for theoretical research.

The third and final reason for finding the neglect of the mentally ill patient's experience problematic is *ethical and political*. Such neglect goes in hand with the unwarranted assumption that the experience of the mentally ill patient is defective in a substantive sense. It goes in hand with the assumption, that is, that such an experience is not merely different from the experience of the healthy individual, not merely a statistical anomaly that under specific socio-cultural conditions can make it difficult or impossible for the individual to function well in society, but that it is, in addition, defective from an objective or natural standpoint. In other words, the assumption that it is unnecessary even to attempt to understand the experience of the mentally ill patient as having a recognizable unity obeying a certain logic supports an unwarranted negative valuation of that form of 'experience.' For granted the assumption, the mental life of the patient would involve experiences in the broad sense, but not in the narrow one, and that seems to authorize a disqualification of any claims that the patient may make about her state, her experience, and her situation which diverge from what the practicing psychological scientist considers healthy.

These three reasons for finding the neglect of the mentally ill patient's experience problematic also explain why Foucault, while being suspicious towards scientific psychology, re-

mained enthusiastic toward the psychoanalytic tradition. Freudian psychoanalysis, in opposition to its contemporary scientific approaches to psychology, was based on the assumption that every aspect of the individual's mental life is loaded with significance. And indeed, Freud frequently explicitly contrasted psychoanalysis with other approaches to psychology¹³:

[...] I explained to you that clinical psychiatry takes little notice of the outward form or content of individual symptoms, but that psychoanalysis takes matters up precisely at that point and has established in the first place the fact that symptoms have a sense and are related to the patient's experiences.¹⁴

Similarly, in connection with the content of dreams (the topic of the *Introduction to Binswanger's Dreams and Existence*), Freud writes:

And now we have to make a quick decision. On the one hand, the dream may be, as non-analytic doctors assure us, a sign that the dreamer has slept badly, that not every part of his brain has come to rest equally, that some areas of it, under the influence of an unknown stimuli, endeavored to go on working but were only able to do so in a very incomplete fashion. If that is the case, we shall be right to concern ourselves no further with the product of a nocturnal disturbance which has no psychological value: for what could we expect to derive from investigating it that would be for our purposes? [...] but it is plain that we have from the first decided otherwise. We have—quite arbitrarily, it must be admitted—made the

13. Freud often refers to psychoanalysis as a science. But needless to say, the sense of "scientific psychology" in which Foucault rejected scientific psychology does not encompass psychoanalysis. It is rather the sense of what Freud often refers to as "experimental psychology," and which corresponds to the use of "scientific" made by Foucault in his article: *Scientific Research in Psychology* (Foucault, "La recherche scientifique et la psychologie").

Indeed, the attentive reader will note that the opposition between a speculative philosophical and a scientific approach to psychology drawn by Foucault in *Scientific Research in Psychology* is already at work in the *Introduction to Binswanger's Dream and Existence*, probably echoing Freud's own frequent opposition between psychoanalysis on the one hand, and *speculative philosophy, descriptive psychology and experimental psychology* on the other (Sigmund Freud. *Introductory lectures on psycho-analysis*. Vol. XV. The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud. WW Norton & Company, 1959, p. 24).

14. Freud, *Introductory lectures on psycho-analysis*, p. 318.

assumption, adopted as a postulate, that even this unintelligible dream must be a fully valid psychical act, with sense and worth, which we can use in analysis like any other communication.¹⁵

Within psychoanalytic practice, symptoms and other elements of the patient's life ceased to be regarded as mere nonsensical expressions of the existence of a pathological condition or of a physiological disturbance, and came to be regarded as symbolic expressions of an underlying problem that caused the mental life of the patient to acquire the particular pathological configuration that constitutes the ailment. What is key here, what was at any rate key for Foucault, was the view that these symbolic expressions were loaded with sense, that their manifestation obeyed a certain logic. From this Freudian perspective that so impressed Foucault, this logic underlying pathological behavior, albeit different from the logic governing rational, normal, healthy behavior, involved its own singular, distinctive form of decipherable lawfulness and rationality: the lawfulness and rationality of unconscious desire:

I myself found it [i.e. the theory of dreams] a sheet-anchor during those difficult times when the unrecognized facts of the neuroses used to confuse my inexperienced judgement. Whenever I began to have doubts of the correctness of my wavering conclusions *the successful transformation of a senseless and muddled dream into a logical and intelligible mental process in the dreamer*¹⁶ would renew my confidence of being on the right track.¹⁷

If in spite of the skeptical stance that he adopted toward scientific psychology from the outset, Foucault remained enthusiastic toward the psychoanalytic tradition, it is because psychoanalysis was the original source of the main insight that characterized his conception of psychology and of mental illness: that there is a unity and a rationality in the experience of

15. Sigmund Freud. *New introductory lectures on psycho-analysis*. Vol. XXII. The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud. WW Norton & Company, 1989, pp. 10-11.

16. My emphasis.

17. Freud, *New introductory lectures on psycho-analysis*, p. 9.

the mentally ill individual, and that understanding this unity is essential for understanding mental illness both as an existential phenomenon and as a psychological ailment, as well as for developing effective and non-marginalizing therapeutic practices.

Foucault's criticism of psychology did not merely consist in the rejection of the standard approaches to psychological phenomena of his time; it was from the very outset informed by his endorsement of a different kind of psychology, one that considered the experience of the mentally ill patient as an irreducible element of mental illness, and which traced surface psychological phenomena back to the many configurations of the fundamental structures of human existence that it took to lie at its source.

In order to further clarify Foucault's attitude toward psychology, it will be useful to bring into sharper view this idea of a new and different approach to psychology. In order to identify the distinctiveness of the new psychology, we will closely examine Foucault's claims regarding the relation betweenBinswanger's existential analysis and other domains of enquiry such as philosophical anthropology and philosophy.

2.1.3 Between Natural Psychology and Fundamental Ontology

Existential Psychology as Anthropology

The project of an existential analysis, Foucault tells us, is neither scientific or philosophical, but anthropological. It is not scientific because science aims at concrete, objective and experimental knowledge. Positivistic psychology, in particular, seeks "*to exhaust the meaningful content of man in the reductive concept of homo natura,*" in "*a science of human facts in the style of positive knowledge, of experimental analysis and of naturalistic reflexion,*" a science within which only what belongs to "*an objective sector of a natural universe*" is to be

regarded as ‘fact.’^{18, 19} But if unlike science, existential analysis does not aim at concrete, objective, experimental knowledge: what is its aim, and how does it proceed?

The object of existential analysis is, according to the Foucault of the *Introduction to Binswanger’s Dream and Existence*, the object of anthropology: “*man, or rather, being-man, Menschsein.*” *Menschsein*, in turn, is the concrete, anthropological counterpart of the transcendental, ontological concept of *Dasein*: “*Menschsein is, after all, nothing but the effective and concrete content of what ontology analyzes as the transcendental structure of Dasein.*” Accordingly, taking *Menschsein* as its object, existential analysis ultimately aims at describing “*the real content of an existence*”²⁰ in terms of the transcendental structures that determine its form.

Because existential analysis aims at describing the *real content of existence*, it is distinguished not only from science, but also from speculative philosophy, i.e. *Fundamental Ontology*. The latter does not aim at describing existence, but its *a priori* forms. It does not aim at concrete knowledge of existence, but at transcendental, *a priori*, speculative knowledge of the transcendental forms of existence in terms of which existential analysis understands ‘the real content of existence.’ Thus existential analysis is neither science nor speculative philosophy: not science because it does not aim at concrete, objective, experimental knowledge of *homo natura*, and not speculative philosophy because it does not aim at *a priori* speculative knowledge of *Dasein*, but rather redeploys such knowledge in order to account for its object: the real content of the existence of an individual person.

Foucault’s insistence in distinguishing the register of existential analysis from the registers of scientific psychology and of speculative philosophy (i.e. fundamental ontology) alike is

18. It is noteworthy—we will return to this point—that this choice between scientific and philosophical or speculative forms of research in psychology corresponds exactly to the choice that Foucault was in fact asked to make by an eminent psychiatrist, as he reports at the opening of *Scientific Research and Psychology* (Foucault, “La recherche scientifique et la psychologie”, p. 166), where he forcefully criticizes the very idea that there can be such a thing as scientific research in psychology.

19. Foucault, “Introduction à ‘Le rêve et l’existence’ de Ludwig Binswanger”, p. 94.

20. Foucault, “Introduction à ‘Le rêve et l’existence’ de Ludwig Binswanger”, p. 94.

noteworthy. As we shall see, his enthusiastic endorsement of the project of existential analysis can be best understood as a result of his dissatisfaction with both scientific psychology and speculative philosophy; dissatisfaction with the former because it was too reductive and thus did not lend its proper due to *the subjective* but concrete experiential dimension of the phenomenon of mental illness; dissatisfaction with the latter because being too speculative, it also failed to lend its due importance to the *concrete experiential* dimension of mental illness. Foucault's enthusiastic endorsement of existential analysis was motivated by the conviction that it was the only way of avoiding both reductionism and abstract speculation.²¹ Yet as we shall see, even in the *Introduction* to Binswanger's text, Foucault's conception of the relationship of existential analysis to scientific psychology and fundamental ontology is more complex than these remarks may initially suggest.

Existential Analysis and Scientific Psychology

Early on in the *Introduction to Binswanger's Dream and Existence*, Foucault wrote that existential analysis is "a form of analysis that designates itself as fundamental [my emphasis] relative to all concrete, objective and experimental knowledge."²² Existential analysis is, in other words, fundamental to scientific psychology, it is its ground. It is worth noting how this claim prefigures Foucault's aforementioned criticism of psychiatry toward the end of the article: that the psychiatrist forgets that what he takes to be the in-itself reality of its object, mental illness, is but a fragment of the overall movement of an existence, and that in order to understand the origin and nature of mental illness, it is necessary to trace it back to the existential register on which mental illness is *grounded* and on which existential analysis unfolds.

21. As we shall see, Foucault's enthusiastic attitude toward existential analysis in the style of Binswanger was short-lived. Indeed, in the two other texts written in 1953 alongside with the *Introduction to Binswanger's Dream and Existence*, namely in *Mental Illness and Personality, published in 1954* (Foucault, *Maladie mentale et personnalité*), and in *Psychology from 1850 to 1950*, published in 1957 (Foucault, "La psychologie de 1850 à 1950"), Foucault adopted a rather critical stance towards psychoanalysis and existential analysis, particularly the latter.

22. Foucault, "Introduction à 'Le rêve et l'existence' de Ludwig Binswanger", p. 94.

There is, admittedly, a substantive difference between the scientific psychologist and the existential analyst with respect to what each of them takes to be the origin of psychological phenomena in general and of mental illness in particular: natural phenomena for the former, existential phenomena for the latter. But while this difference is important, it would be a mistake to understand Foucault's criticism of psychology as indicative of a wholesale rejection of the assumptions of psychology or as expressive of a hostile attitude towards science in general. On the contrary, scientific psychology and existential analysis share a single explanatory strategy that is based on a common assumption. Namely, that the task of explaining psychological phenomena consists in tracing them back to an origin that lies at a more fundamental level of description, an origin that can be accurately referred to as a conception of 'human essence.' Both scientific psychology and existential analysis are informed by the assumption that there is an 'essence' of human being: *homo natura* for the scientist, *Menschsein* for the existential analyst; both attempt to explain psychological phenomena in terms of that 'essence'; both understand mental illness as a defective realization of that 'essence.'

Furthermore, this assumption, common to scientific psychology and existential analysis, is iterated on the register of fundamental ontology. In the *Introduction to Binswanger's Dream and Existence*, Foucault writes that one of the tasks that existential analysis must accomplish in order to legitimize itself ("*faire valoir ses droits*") is to show how its analysis of *Menschsein* can be articulated with the analytic of existence proper to fundamental ontology: existential analysis can only justify itself by showing that it is grounded on fundamental ontology. But he postpones this task for an ulterior work, and settles for pointing out that the object of existential analysis, *Menschsein* is "*nothing but the effective and concrete content of what ontology analyzes as the transcendental structure of Dasein.*"²³ Just as there is an 'essence' of human being for the scientist, *homo natura*, and just as there is an 'essence' of human being for the existential analyst, *Menschsein*, there is an 'essence' of human being

23. Foucault, "Introduction à 'Le rêve et l'existence' de Ludwig Binswanger", p. 94.

for the fundamental ontologist: *Dasein*. From all three perspectives, to explain psychological phenomena, broadly construed, is, ultimately, to trace them back to and describe them in terms of that ‘essence’; mental illness is ultimately conceived as a defective realization of that ‘essence.’ What is more, from the perspectives of both the existential analyst and the fundamental ontologist, explanation must ultimately be couched in terms of the fundamental structures of ‘*Dasein*.’²⁴

Thus we can identify a pattern regarding Foucault’s early conception of psychology in particular and of theoretical discourse in general. In 1953, Foucault subscribed to a fairly naive conception of psychology. According to this conception, the aim of psychology was *to adequately capture the truth about the human psyche and mental illness, a truth that is determined by the ‘essence’ of human being*. Generalizing, we may say that for the Foucault

24. In this connection, it is interesting to note that Foucault’s *Introduction to Binswanger’s Dream and Existence* contains the germ of his famous critique of the human sciences (“les sciences humaines”). He writes that one of the tasks that existential analysis must accomplish in order to *legitimize* itself (“*faire valoir ses droits*”) is to show how its analysis of *Menschsein* can be articulated with the analytic of existence that is the object of fundamental ontology, and he adds that this project of legitimation involves two problems or tasks: a problem of grounding (*de fondement*) that consists in providing a definition of the conditions of possibility of existential analysis on the basis of an analytic of existence, and a problem of justification that consists in accounting for the distinctive value and the independent character of the existential analysis over an analytic of existence. Existential analysis must be grounded on fundamental ontology because *Menschsein*, its object, is the concrete manifestation of the fundamental structures of *Dasein*, the topic of fundamental ontology. But existential analysis must also be independent from fundamental ontology because the fundamental structures of *Dasein* are only ‘given’ through their concrete manifestations in *Menschsein*. And herein lies the germ of the empirico-transcendental doublet (Michel Foucault. *Les mots et les choses*. Gallimard, 1966, Ch. 9), the problem that led to Foucault’s infamous criticism of anthropology, the social sciences, and to his provocative claim about the ‘death of man.’ The problem, hinted at by Foucault, is this: if the transcendental structures of *Dasein* can only be known through its real manifestations in concrete existence, and thus through the kind of anthropological study of *Menschsein* provided by existential analysis, how could the latter justify itself by showing that it is grounded in those fundamental and fundamentally inaccessible structures? It is worth noting that although Foucault did not develop the problem here in the *Introduction* to Binswanger’s text, but settled for postponing the two tasks of showing that existential analysis is at both grounded on and independent from fundamental ontology, one of the projects that he pursued in the following years was a close study of Kant’s *Anthropology from an Empirical Standpoint* (Immanuel. Kant and Michel Foucault. *Anthropologie d’un point de vue pragmatique: précédé de Michel Foucault, Introduction à l’anthropologie*. Bibliothèque des textes philosophiques. Vrin, 2008), aimed precisely at exploring Kant’s own understanding of the relationship between a science of human being and a critical-transcendental project aimed at drawing the limits of possible knowledge. It is also worth noting that in that text, Foucault makes clear that anthropology is problematic only when it is forgotten that it must necessarily be accompanied by a critique of itself. The problem with the *sciences humaines* is that contrary to Kant, who was lucid about the point, they forget the distinctive relation of co-dependence between the empirical sciences of human being, and the transcendental assumptions on which it is they are grounded.

of 1953, the aim of theoretical discourse in general was to adequately capture the truth about the objects within its domain; the content of each such discourse was to be determined by the nature of the objects within its domain; its standard of assessment was the extent to which it had adequately captured the truth about the nature of the objects within its domain; finally, the history of a theoretical discourse was the internal history of its continuous progress towards the truth that it sought. As we shall see, Foucault would soon abandon this approach to psychological and, more broadly, to theoretical discourse about human being.

2.1.4 *Reconsidering the Standard Story*

I began this part of the dissertation by describing what I take to be a common way of representing of the early stages of Foucault's career. This widespread conception of the beginning of Foucault's career is built around three putative facts: Foucault was initially interested in and had rather favorable attitude towards psychology and psychiatry, enough to seriously entertain the possibility of becoming a psychologist or a psychiatrist; second, something happened: the so-called encounter with Nietzsche; third, as a consequence of this encounter with Nietzsche, he changed his mind, even developing a hostile attitude toward psychology.

The considerations of the preceding section reveal some of the reasons for thinking that this standard picture is somewhat inaccurate and incomplete. It is inaccurate because as far as the textual evidence reaches, Foucault's attitude toward scientific research in psychology seems to have been one of permanent suspicion.²⁵ The truth is that Foucault favored certain marginal forms of psychology, such as existential analysis. But these forms of psychology

25. In this regard, Foucault was no doubt partly inspired by Merleau-Ponty's own approach to scientific research in psychology. Economy requires that I leave aside the interesting and hitherto under-explored question of the Merleau-Ponty's influence on Foucault's thought. But see, in this regard, the recent work of Etienne Bimbenet (Étienne Bimbenet. *Nature et humanité: le problème anthropologique dans l'oeuvre de Merleau-Ponty*. Bibliothèque d'histoire de la philosophie: Nouvelle série. Vrin, 2004; Étienne Bimbenet. *Après Merleau-Ponty: études sur la fécondité d'une pensée*. Problèmes et controverses. Vrin, 2011) and Judith Revel (Judith Revel. *Foucault avec Merleau-Ponty: ontologie politique, présentisme et histoire*. Philosophie du présent. Vrin, 2015).

were so distant from the scientific psychology of both his time and our own, that to say that at the beginning of his career Foucault's interest in psychology was strong enough to drive him to entertain a career in psychology would be at best misleading. While it suggests that Foucault's attitude towards the psychology of his time was favorable, the truth is that it was unfavorable enough that the only type of approach toward psychological phenomena that he could endorse, existential analysis, was of a kind that the practicing psychologists of his time would in most instances dismiss as empty speculation.²⁶

But as we have also seen, although Foucault's attitude towards the psychology of his time was ambivalent from the outset, he continued to subscribe to a traditional conception of scientific discourse about human being (including psychological discourse), of the practices that are grounded on such discourse, and on the history of those sciences. According to this conception, the object of scientific discourse about human being is a certain aspect of the 'essence' or nature of human being, the legitimacy of the practices that it grounds is a function of the extent to which it adequately captures the relevant aspects of human essence, the history of that discourse is the history of its progress towards an ever more accurate conception of human being. This aspect of Foucault's attitude toward psychology is of particular importance for understanding the depth of Nietzsche's influence and of the ensuing change in Foucault's intellectual project. As we will see in the next section, that shift is best understood as the abandonment of that traditional conception of discourse about human being.

26. Foucault, "La recherche scientifique et la psychologie", pp. 166-167.

2.2 From Existential Analysis Toward the Historical Critique of Psychology

Consequently, what is needed from now on is historical philosophizing.²⁷

As we have seen, while Foucault's attitude toward psychological discourse in general in the *Introduction to Binswanger's Dream and Existence* is ambivalent, he enthusiastically endorsed existential analysis. The *Introduction* is written from the perspective of someone who believes that it is possible to understand mental phenomena and mental illness in terms of general truths about human being, and who believes that existential analysis has identified the right level of description for providing an account of psychological phenomena. It is written from a perspective that is internal to psychology; from a perspective which, however ambivalent towards mainstream psychological discourse, remains the perspective of a psychologist. Surprisingly, in the texts written in 1953, *Mental Illness and Personality* and *Psychology from 1850 to 1950*,²⁸ Foucault's attitude towards psychology in general and existential analysis in particular were importantly different.

Consider, for instance, the closing statement of the second to last chapter of *Mental Illness and Personality*:

Certes, on peut situer la maladie mentale par rapport à la genèse humaine, par rapport à l'histoire psychologique et individuelle, par rapport aux formes d'existence. Mais on ne doit pas confondre ces divers aspects de la maladie avec ses origines réelles, si on ne veut pas avoir recours à des explications mythiques, comme l'évolution des structures psychologiques, ou la théorie des instincts, ou une anthropologie existentielle. En réalité, c'est dans l'histoire seulement que l'on

27. Friedrich Nietzsche. *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*. Cambridge University Press, 1996, I, 2, p. 13.

28. For the claims that *Mental Illness and Personality* and *Psychology from 1850 to 1950*, published in 1954 and 1957 (resp.) were written in 1953, see (Eribon, *Michel Foucault : 1926-1984*, p. 61) and (Eribon, *Michel Foucault : 1926-1984*, p. 73) (resp.).

peut découvrir les conditions de possibilité des structures psychologiques.^{29,30}

Under the guise of existential anthropology, existential analysis is here placed alongside scientific psychology and classical Freudian psychoanalysis as suffering of the same deficiency that they do: it provides ‘mythical’ explanations of mental illness and its origins. And as the end of the passage indicates, this change in attitude toward existential analysis, from enthusiastic endorsement to critical disdain, went in hand with a perspectival shift. When Foucault criticizes existential analysis, it is no longer from a point of view internal to psychology, but from an external standpoint; it is no longer from the psychologist’s point of view, but from the standpoint of a certain kind of historian of psychology.

Furthermore, Foucault’s conviction of the mythical status of psychological explanation, and of the need for adopting a historical perspective when considering psychological phenomena were not restricted to *Mental Illness and Personality*. It was also forcefully expressed in the concluding lines of *Psychology from 1850 to 1950*, suggesting that it was one of his main preoccupations, or most important intellectual discoveries, at the time:

Mais l’interrogation fondamentale demeure. Nous avons montré, en débutant, que la psychologie ‘scientifique’ est née des contradictions que l’homme rencontre dans sa pratique; et que d’autre part, tout le développement de cette ‘science’ a consisté en un lent abandon du ‘positivisme’ qui l’alignait à l’origine sur les sciences de la nature. Cet abandon et l’analyse nouvelle des significations objectives ont-ils pu résoudre les contradictions qui l’ont motivée? Il ne semble pas, puisque dans les formes actuelles de la psychologie on retrouve ces contradictions sous l’aspect d’une ambiguïté que l’on décrit comme coextensive à l’existence

29. Foucault, *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, pp. 89-90.

30. “It is certainly possible to situate mental illness in relation to human genesis, to individual psychological history, and to the forms of existence. But one ought not to confuse these various aspects of mental illness with its real origins, if one does not want to rely on mythical explanations such as the evolution of psychological structures, the theory of instincts, or an existential anthropology. In reality, it is in history alone that one can discover the conditions of possibility of psychological structures” (M Foucault. *Mental illness and personality*. NY: Vintage Books, 1954).

humaine. Ni l'effort vers la détermination d'une causalité statistique ni la réflexion anthropologique sur l'existence ne peuvent les dépasser réellement; tout au plus peuvent-ils les esquiver, c'est-à-dire les retrouver finalement transposées et travesties.

L'avenir de la psychologie n'est-il pas dès lors dans la prise au sérieux de ces contradictions, dont l'expérience a justement fait naître la psychologie? Il n'y aurait dès lors de psychologie possible que par l'analyse des conditions d'existence de l'homme et par la reprise de ce qu'il y a de plus humain en l'homme, c'est-à-dire son histoire.^{31,32}

Foucault's views about psychology toward the end of 1953 seem thus built around a conception of the traditional notion of mental illness as a failed attempt to capture, through what he refers to as *mythical* explanations of different psychological theories, what is in fact a historical phenomenon, and which as such can only be appropriately understood through historical analysis. Thus, by the time he finished writing *Mental Illness and Personality* and *Psychology from 1850 to 1950* in 1953, the same year of publication of the *Introduction to Binswanger's Dream and Existence*, Foucault had substantively altered the approach to psychology and to the concept of mental illness that he voiced in that earlier text.

Interestingly, *Mental Illness and Personality*, a work which has received comparatively little attention, lends expression to both attitudes. As we shall see in the next section, the

31. Foucault, "La psychologie de 1850 à 1950", pp. 164-165.

32. "But the basic question remains. We had shown, at the beginning, that 'scientific' psychology is born of the contradiction that human being encounters in practice, and that, on the other hand, the whole development of this science has consisted in the slow abandonment of the positivism that originally aligned it with the natural sciences. This abandonment and the new analysis of objective meanings, have they been able to resolve the contradictions that motivated them? It wouldn't seem so, since one finds in the current forms of psychology those contradictions under the guise of an ambiguity that is described as coextensive of human existence. Neither the effort toward the establishment of a statistical causality nor the anthropological reflection about existence can actually overcome these contradictions. They can at best dodge them, that is, eventually find them again transposed and transvested.

Isn't thus the future of psychology in the serious consideration of those contradictions, of which the experience precisely gave birth to psychology? There would accordingly be no possible psychology if not through the analysis of the conditions of existence of human being and the recovery of what is most human in human being, its history." (Foucault, "La psychologie de 1850 à 1950", pp. 164-165)

introduction and first part of the book read as a history of psychological theory told from the perspective of a historian of psychology who, as a historian, believes that the history of a science is the history of dialectical progress towards ever more descriptively accurate theories and who, as a psychologist, believes that the emergence of existential analysis is the most recent movement in that dialectic. The second part of the text reads as a historical critique of psychological discourse written by someone who is skeptical of the assumption that the human sciences have an object of study that is independent of both the concrete social and historical conditions *within which* its existence unfolds, and of the concrete and historical conditions *from within which* it casts a scientific gaze upon itself.

2.2.1 *Foucault's Two Attitudes Towards Psychology and its History in* Mental Illness and Personality

The changes in Foucault's attitude towards mental illness just described are noticeable within *Mental Illness and Personality*. There is, indeed, a stark contrast between Foucault's methodology and standpoint in the first and second parts of the book. The enquiry throughout first part of *Mental Illness and Personality* is driven by the question of the origin of mental illness. Foucault's approach to this question is historical, but the history of the origin of mental illness that he provides is written from a standpoint *internal* to the psychological sciences in the sense characterized above³³: the standpoint of someone who regards the history psychology an account of the continuous and progressive movement towards psychological theories towards psychological truths. In the second part, this standpoint is abandoned. Foucault adopts an *external* standpoint towards the concept of mental illness and its history, a standpoint from which the psychological explanations of mental illness presented in the first part of the book are characterized as mythical explanations that fail to locate the real origins of mental illness where they rightly belong, in the inconsistent demands that society imposes on the individual.

33. See p. 45 above.

Thus, in first part of the book, in Chapters II through IV, Foucault follows the dialectical movement of the various answers that have been provided, from within psychology, to the question of the origin of mental illness. In chapter II, mental illness is approached from the naturalist perspective of developmental psychologists. From this standpoint, mental illness is conceived as a problem in the organic evolution (i.e. development) of the individual: in the course of the individual's development, the psychological functions of the well-developed adult are abolished and replaced by functions characteristic of individuals in prior stages of psychological development. Mental illness is in this manner conceived as regression to a prior stage of development. From this perspective, the possibility of mental illness is virtually present in the development of every individual. In chapter III, which corresponds to a developmental theory enriched with the insights of Freudian psychoanalysis, mental illness is approached from the perspective of the history of the individual; it is regarded as a problem in the psychological history of the individual. The account of chapter II was incomplete in that the regression to a prior stage of development to which mental illness was presented as a purely natural phenomenon. Consequently, the question of what causes regression in some individuals but not others, an account of the morbid event that trigger those reactive and regressive processes, was lacking. As a result, while mental illness *in general* was characterized as an ever-present 'virtuality' (i.e. a possibility) in the life of individuals *in general*, *actual* occurrences of mental illnesses in *particular* individuals remained unexplained. In chapter III, mental illness is no longer presented as an organic virtuality, but as the deliberate attempt on the part of the mentally ill patient to flee—in the existential sense of the term—from the present.³⁴ From this perspective, mental illness comes about when in order to protect herself from a conflictual present, the patient replaces the conflictual experience of that present by an aspect of her past experience that symbolically represents and solves the relevant conflict:

La maladie a pour contenu l'ensemble des réactions de fuite et de défense par

34. Foucault, *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, p. 39.

lesquelles le malade répond à la situation dans laquelle il se trouve; et c'est à partir de ce présent, de cette situation actuelle qu'il faut comprendre et donner sens aux régressions évolutives qui se font jour dans les conduites pathologiques; la régression n'est pas seulement une virtualité de l'évolution, elle est une conséquence de l'histoire.^{35,36}

However, like the conception of mental illness in chapter II, this conception of mental illness had its limitations. The historical approach of chapter III lead to a conception of mental illness as the result of a deliberate attempt on the part of the patient to flee away from a conflictual present. But something remained unexplained: Insofar as an experience of conflict does not always result in mental illness, psychoanalytic theory does not explain why some cases of an experience of conflict issue in mental illness while others do not:

L'individu normal fait l'expérience de la contradiction, le malade fait une expérience contradictoire; l'expérience de l'un s'oeuvre sur la contradiction, celle de l'autre se ferme sur elle. En d'autres termes: conflit normal, ou ambiguïté de la situation; conflit pathologique, ou ambivalence de l'expérience.³⁷

And, Foucault continues, if fear is the *normal* reaction to an external danger, *anguish is the affective dimension of this internal contradiction* in the mentally ill patient.³⁸ Thus the necessity of a style of analysis which, like existential analysis, can account for the pathological experience of anxiety, as opposed to the normal experience of fear:

[U]n nouveau style d'analyse s'impose: forme d'expérience qui déborde ses propres manifestations, l'angoisse ne peut jamais se laisser réduire par une analyse de

35. Foucault, *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, p. 44.

36. "The overall content of mental illness are reactions of feeling and defense whereby the ill person responds to the situation where they find themselves; and it is taking this present, this actual situation, as our starting point that we must understand and assign meaning to the evolutionary regressions that see the light in pathological conduct; regression is not only a virtuality of evolution, it is a consequence of history." (Foucault, *Mental illness and personality*).

37. Foucault, *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, p. 48.

38. Foucault, *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, p. 48.

type naturaliste [like the one presented in chapter II]; ancrée au coeur de l'histoire individuelle, pour lui donner sous ses péripéties, une signification unique, elle ne peut non plus être épuisée par une analyse de type historique [like the one presented in chapter III]; mais l'histoire et la nature de l'homme ne peuvent être comprises que par référence à elle. Il faut se placer maintenant au centre de cette expérience [de l'angoisse]; c'est seulement en la comprenant de l'intérieur qu'il sera possible de mettre en place dans l'univers morbide les structures naturelles constituées par l'évolution, et les mécanismes individuels cristallisés par l'histoire psychologique.³⁹

Note that, just as he had in the *Introduction* to Binswanger's *Dream and Existence*, Foucault is effectively suggesting that both human nature and the personal history of the individual can only be understood against the backdrop of the results of existential analysis. In other words, the idea of mental illness as the deliberate attempt to flee from a conflictual experience of the present which Foucault had present in the chapter III of *Mental Illness and Personality* did not provide the resources to explain why some such experiences turn into pathologies, and into an experience of anguish, while others do not. The conception of mental illness presented in chapter IV, mental illness as understood by existential analysis, is meant to address this issue by describing the experience of madness from the perspective of the mentally ill patient. The style of analysis is, in this case, phenomenological. The analysis reveals that the mentally ill patient abandons herself to the experience of a morbid world as a result of her incapacity to resolve the conflict of her present experience and to project herself into a future.⁴⁰

In this manner, in chapters II, III, and IV, Foucault presents a history of psychology meant to capture the dialectical progression of the psychological understanding of mental illness through three states that correspond to three styles of analysis:

39. Foucault, *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, p. 53.

40. Foucault, *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, p. 68.

1. The organic-naturalistic analysis characteristic of empirical psychology, which leads to a conception of mental illness as regression to a prior stage of development;
2. The historical-psychological analysis characteristic of classical (i.e. Freudian) psychoanalysis, which takes into account the history of the individual, and leads to a conception of mental illness as fleeing away from a present conflict into a past that provides a symbolic solution to that conflict;
3. The phenomenological-anthropological analysis that leads to a conception of mental illness as abandonment to the experience of a morbid world as a result of the inability to resolve a conflictual experience of the real world and constitute one's experience as meaningful.

*

The shift in Foucault's perspective in the second part of the book is striking. In a certain sense, the driving question of that second part of the book continues to be the question of the origin of mental illness. But the answer to this question is no longer sought within the psychological sciences. The driving insight, presented in the introductory section of the book, is that mental pathology is an essentially historical phenomenon: "*Un fait est devenu, depuis long temps, le lieu commun de la sociologie et de la pathologie mentale: la maladie n'a sa réalité et sa valeur de maladie qu'à l'intérieur d'une culture qui la reconnaît comme telle*"⁴¹. In light of this insight, the question of the origin of mental illness is doubly displaced. Displaced, first, in that its answer is no longer sought at the level of the individual: *the locus of analysis* is no longer her organic development, her psychological history, or her experience of a morbid world. The answer to the question of the origin of mental illness is now sought in a study of the culture that recognizes it as such, of the culture that confers upon a certain

41. Foucault, *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, p. 71.

behavioral pattern the status of mental illness. The question of the origin of mental illness is displaced also in this second, and more radical way: Foucault's enquiry about mental illness is no longer driven by the desire to understand *the phenomenon of mental illness, its causes, its origin*. The main *object of enquiry* is now rather *the culture within which a certain kind of behavior is treated as a mental illness*. The project is no longer that of finding out the conditions under which an individual can come to suffer from a given affliction, whose status as a mental illness is taken for granted. Guided by the insight that what a culture regards as a mental illness as revelatory of the choices that that culture has made, the project has now become that of using mental illnesses as the means to understand the exclusionary choices operated by the culture that has granted them that status. Thus, he concludes the introduction to the second part of the book as follows:

Les analyses de nos psychologues et de nos sociologues, qui font du malade un déviant et qui cherchent l'origine du morbide dans l'anormal, sont donc avant tout, une projection de thèmes culturels. En réalité, une société s'exprime positivement dans les maladies mentales que manifestent ses membres; et ceci, quel que soit le statut qu'elle donne à ces formes morbides: qu'elle les place au centre de sa vie religieuse comme c'est souvent le cas chez les primitifs, ou qu'elle cherche à les expatrier en les situant à l'extérieur de la vie sociale, comme le fait notre culture.

Deux questions se posent alors: comment notre culture en est-elle venue à donner à la maladie le sens de la déviation, et au malade un statut qui l'exclut? Et comment, malgré cela, notre société s'exprime-t-elle dans ces formes morbides où elle refuse de se reconnaître?⁴²

In the *Introduction to Binswanger's Dream and Existence*, and even in chapters II to IV of *Mental Illness and Personality*, Foucault's goal was to shed light on the notion of mental

42. Foucault, *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, p. 75.

illness, to understand its causes and to shed light on and contribute to the development of the kind of therapeutic practice that would most effectively restore the patient's health. His aim in the second part of *Mental Illness and Personality* is substantively different: to use the history of *the concept* of mental illness as the means *to criticize the society* that recognizes it as such for the exclusionary choices that it has made, and which, furthermore, it has subsequently tried to cover up through what Foucault begins at the time to refer to as mythical explanations: the mythical explanations of a psychological science that attempts to place in the individual's organic constitution, in her psychological history, or in the form of her experience the source of an affliction that society itself has produced.

Thus, Foucault tells us, mental illness could only be regarded as a problem in the organic evolution of the individual (Chapter II) by a society that established, between the present and the past of the individual, an unbreachable boundary, as was indeed the boundary placed between adult life and childhood by the emergence of pedagogical theories in the XVIII century.⁴³ Similarly, mental illness could only be regarded as a conflict of instincts in the psychological history of the individual by a society that imposed on individuals the irreconcilable demands of acting on feelings of solidarity towards other men and on waging war against them, as did society in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.⁴⁴ Finally, mental illness could only be regarded as the individual's absorption in a morbid world by a world which was unable to offer the individual a solution to the contradictions that it forced him to experience.⁴⁵ The three conceptions of the origin of mental illness presented in chapters II to IV of *Mental Illness and Personality* are thus presented as three myths: the myth of the evolution of psychological structures, which is the myth of a society that no longer knows how to recognize itself in its own *past*; the myth of a theory of instincts, which is the myth of a society that can no longer recognize itself in its *present* incoherent demands of solidarity

43. Foucault, *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, p. 85.

44. Foucault, *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, p. 87.

45. Foucault, *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, p. 88.

and war; finally, the myth of an existential anthropology, which is the myth of a society that cannot recognize the sense and direction of its present activity and its ensuing *future*.⁴⁶

What is important in this shift of perspective is not so much its immediate effects—the fact, for instance, that the explanations of existential anthropology, which Foucault had praised both in the *Introduction* to Binswanger’s text and even a few pages before the passages just referenced, in the first part of *Mental Illness and Personality*, were now described as mythical explanations. What is important in the shift is rather that it consisted in the adoption of a critical distance towards the psychological sciences and, indeed, towards any discourse purporting to explain an alleged form of deficiency in a type of human being by reference to human nature: to its organic nature, to its psychological history, to its fundamental existential structures. For the first time, Foucault casts a regard of suspicion on the content of a discourse about human being, asking not what its positive content is, but what its exclusionary implications are, and what these exclusionary implications reveal about the society that chooses to regard them as rooted in human nature. Foucault’s guiding question, from that moment on, is no longer what it was in the *Introduction to Binswanger’s* text: how mental illness is to be traced back to what is most fundamentally human, to the existential structures of Being-in-the-world. The question has now become: What does the collective choice that we have made to call such-and-such behavioral patterns instances of mental illness, and to see mental-illness as a loss of the individual’s status as a free and autonomous subject, tell us about ourselves, about the society that we live in, about the problems that it confronts?

46. Foucault, *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, p. 89-91.

2.3 The Shift in Foucault's Attitude Towards Psychology in 1953

The shift in Foucault's attitude toward psychology in 1953 can be understood in terms of this shift in Foucault's approach to psychology from the first to the second part of *Mental Illness and Personality*. In section 2.1, we saw that while Foucault was critical of scientific psychology from the outset, he initially subscribed to a conception of psychological discourse as (i) a discourse oriented towards a truth that is dictated by the nature of its objects alone, by the 'essence' or 'nature' of human being, and (ii) a discourse which, as a result, was to be evaluated in terms of the extent to which it adequately captured this truth. In section 2.2, we saw that toward the end of 1953, one of the central principles at work in Foucault's approach to psychology was that psychological discourse has effects on and is affected by phenomena that lie well outside the domain of the objects that constitute its subject-matter. If psychological discourse remains oriented toward psychological truths, Foucault's conception of what counts as psychological truth had undergone a substantive revision.

On the revised conception, what counts as truth is not only determined by 'purely psychological phenomena': for there are no purely psychological phenomena that it would be possible to isolate from the cultural environment within which human psychology unfolds. The truth of psychological discourse is no longer regarded as dictated by the 'nature' of its objects alone, by the 'nature' or 'essence' of human being. And this is not because psychologists had failed to identify the 'real truths' about human nature and because what had been taken to be true psychological discourse was eventually revealed to be false. That, after all, had been the form of Foucault's initial critique of scientific psychology, so it would not amount to a substantive shift in his attitude. The sense in which the truth of psychological discourse was no longer regarded as dictated by the nature of its object from that time on is rather that the 'nature' of 'the object of psychology,'⁴⁷ the idea of a 'normal,' 'healthy'

47. 'The object of psychology' in scare quotes because nothing rules out the possibility that the practice of psychological research changes and constitutes a different object of study.

personality, came to be understood as being essentially historical. As a consequence, psychological discourse could and had to be subjected to standards other than the descriptive adequacy of its claims. To the extent that the object of psychology came to be understood as partly determined by social-historical phenomena, to the extent also that it came to be understood as having extra-psychological, social-historical implications, psychological discourse was revealed to be a discourse that could be and had to be evaluated in terms of its social and historical implications. Psychological discourse thus first appeared as the possible object of a theoretically, ethically and politically necessary social-historical critique.

In sum, Foucault's change of attitude towards psychology in 1953 can be understood as a shift in his *object* of study, in the *question* that he sought to address, in the *goal* that answering this question was ultimately meant to achieve, and in the *method* employed in answering the question. At the end of 1953, Foucault's *object* of study no longer was mental illness as such, or the mentally ill individual, or human being in general, but the culture that assigns madness the status of mental illness; the *question* that Foucault sought to answer was no longer that of the origin of mental illness in the mentally ill individual, but its origin in the society that recognizes it as such. Similarly, Foucault's ultimate *goal* in answering this question was no longer to understand the truth about mental illness, conceived as a truth about the mentally ill individual and, more generally, as an internal possibility of human existence, it was to identify and understand the exclusionary choices operated by the culture that had granted madness the status of mental illness, and to identify the social cost of accepting the idea that there is a culture-independent truth about mental illness. Finally, Foucault's *method* was no longer that of writing an internal history of the sciences, but to write an external, critical history of the development, in tandem, of psychological theory, of a series of practices regarding the treatment of the mentally ill, and of a positive conception of 'normal' or 'healthy' human being. Foucault's change of attitude toward psychology was a change of attitude towards the origin and status of scientific *truths about human nature*, a change of attitude towards the origin of such truths, toward their content, their implications,

and their historicity. Those were the pivotal points and direction of the shift in Foucault's attitude towards psychology in 1953. Human being, discourse about human being, normative standards for the assessment and of human behavior: not transhistorical phenomena, not *a priori* transcendental structures defining the form and limits of possible knowledge and experience, but historically singular and local, variable and contingent structures.

CHAPTER 3
THE HISTORICITY OF TRUTH AND FORMS OF
RATIONALITY

Consequently, what is needed from now on is historical philosophizing¹

Let me begin this chapter with a brief recapitulation. I began the dissertation (Chapter 1, p. 3) by drawing attention to Foucault's double reformulation of the nihilist slogan. First, from the conditional: "if God does not exist, everything is permitted," to the question: "How to live if I must face up to the fact that 'nothing is true'?" And subsequently, from that question, to the claim that "at the heart of Western culture lies the difficulty in describing the link between the concern for the truth and the aesthetics of existence."²

The goal of this part of the dissertation (Part II) is to provide a clearer insight into the development of Foucault's intellectual project by closely examining the impact of his reading of Nietzsche in the early 1950s in the gestation of that project. This, in turn, will enable us to better understand the relationship between Foucault's project and the theme of nihilism, and the content and role of the idea that 'nothing is true' and of the concept of the will to truth within Foucault's ethical views. With these resources in place, we will be in a position to clarify Foucault's ethical views and the enigmatic notion of the aesthetics of existence in the subsequent parts of the dissertation.

We've been approaching the question of the Nietzschean influence in the early Foucault through an enquiry into the shift in his attitude towards psychology in the early fifties, an enquiry that I have organized into three sets of questions: the first concern Foucault's attitude toward psychology at the beginning of his career; the second, the main changes in that attitude around 1953; the third, the way in which reading Nietzsche might have contributed to that change.³ The first section of the previous chapter (§2.1) led to the conclusion that in his first publication, written in 1952, Foucault was critical of naturalist approaches toward mental illness because he took mental illness to be ultimately rooted in, and thus to be ultimately explicable only in terms of, the 'fundamental structures' of

1. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, I, 2, p. 13.

2. Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984*, p. 190 (175).

3. See p. 26 above.

human existence. The second section (§2.2), a study of the change in Foucault's attitude toward psychology within *Mental Illness and Personality*, led to the conclusion (§2.3) that Foucault's attitude toward psychology had undergone substantive changes by the time the book was completed in 1953. Foucault came to see psychology, its content, and its social and political implications, as cultural or historical phenomena. His interest shifted from the psychological question: "What is mental illness, and how is it best understood and treated?" to the question: "Given that the attitude adopted by a given culture toward madness is a choice, what can we learn about our culture in light of its choice to regard madness as a mental illness, and to develop an exclusionary apparatus along with this idea?" Building on these results, we're now in a position to address the third set of questions: What were the specific ways in which reading Nietzsche altered Foucault's understanding of and his attitude toward mental illness in this particular way? What specific aspects of Nietzsche's thought persuaded Foucault that existential analysis could not enable him to understand and explain mental illness, and thereby motivate this shift in his attitude toward psychology?

It will be important to keep in mind that our overarching goal in this part of the dissertation is not so much to understand Foucault's attitude toward psychology, as it is to understand the influence of Foucault's reading of Nietzsche in the early 1950s in the gestation of Foucault's lifelong intellectual project. Our enquiry into Nietzsche's influence on Foucault's philosophical project on the basis of his change of attitude towards psychology has been an attempt to understand that influence on the basis of its effects. But in addition to Foucault's early writings on psychology, there is another set of resources at our disposal for carrying out this task.

In a number of interviews and texts from the late 1970s and 1980s, Foucault casts a retrospective glance on his career, and describes the intellectual landscape of France in the 1950s and his position *vis-à-vis* the key movements and ways of thinking of the time. By closely examining some of these texts, we will be able to identify the main features of Foucault's general intellectual outlook or frame of mind at the time of the reading of Nietzsche

in the early 1950s, and of his conception of the intellectual landscape of the time. Based on the results of this enquiry, we will be able to approach the question of the Nietzschean influence on Foucault through our understanding of the effects that it had on his attitude toward psychology, and through our understanding of the conditions that rendered Foucault susceptible to the Nietzschean influence, of those aspects of his philosophical views and interests in the early 1950s that rendered him particularly sensitive to certain ideas and themes in Nietzsche's work.

The enquiry into Foucault's experience of the intellectual environment in the early 1950s will lead us to identify an ethical and political imperative to break away from traditional ways of thinking and of being as one the central motivations in Foucault's intellectual project (§3.1). Furthermore, as we shall see, while some of the main philosophical movements of the time (Hegelianism, phenomenology, Marxism) afforded conceptual and methodological tools that had the potential to contribute to the fulfillment of this imperative, they also had conceptual blindspots that ultimately neutralized this transformative potential, leaving them instead to serve as anchoring points to the traditional ways of thinking that Foucault sought to uproot. These conceptual blindspots, these anchoring points that ruled out the possibility of a sufficiently radical rupture with tradition, were focalized on the ideas of historical change and historical discourse, the nature of the subject and of discourse about the subject, and truth, discourse about truth and the status of given discourses as true and about the commitment to pursue the truth (§3.2). Thus, at the time of the encounter with Nietzsche, Foucault felt the force of an imperative to break free from tradition, and sought, in vain, the resources to render intelligible the possibility of and to factually bring about that rupture. The reading of Nietzsche marked a turning point in Foucault's career because as we shall see in the remaining sections of this chapter, as well as in the next chapter, Nietzsche's reflections on truth and 'the will to truth' (§3.3), his reflections on history and the idea of a critical history of the present (§3.4), and his reflections, finally, on the historicity of the concept of human being (§4), offered the conceptual resources required for understanding

the possibility of the change in mentality and the break with tradition that he regarded as ethically and politically necessary, it offered the methodological resources for undertaking the project of bringing about those changes through what he would eventually come to refer to as a history of *thought* and of *forms of experience*.⁴

4. See, for instance, (Michel Foucault. “Préface à l’Histoire de la sexualité”. In: *Dits et écrits*. Vol. II. Gallimard, 1984, 2001. Chap. 340, pp. 1397–1403, p. 334).

3.1 An Ethical Imperative to Break with Tradition

We have seen that Foucault described his own reading of Nietzsche as a shock or a revelation that brought about a radical change in his perspective towards philosophy.⁵ In an interview from the late 1970s with Duccio Trombadori, Foucault explains that in the French intellectual environment of the early 1950s, developing a radically new approach to philosophy seemed not only desirable, but even ethically necessary, for it seemed key for breaking away from the traditional ways of thinking which, in the aftermath of the war, seemed to have made Nazism and the occupation of France possible:

L'expérience de la guerre nous avait démontré la nécessité et l'urgence d'une société radicalement différente de celle dans laquelle nous vivions. Cette société qui avait permis le nazisme, qui s'était couchée devant lui, et qui était passée en bloc au côté de De Gaulle. Face à tout cela, une grande partie de la jeunesse française avait eu une réaction de dégoût total. On désirait un monde et une société non seulement différents, mais qui auraient été un autre nous-mêmes; on voulait être complètement autre dans un monde complètement autre.⁶

The conviction that traditional ways of thinking had made political catastrophes possible thus made it seem necessary to leave them behind. The desire for a novel approach to philosophy that would pave the way for a radical break with the past was not a whimsical wish for originality, it was the desire to fulfill an ethical and political imperative.

Now it can be tempting for us to understand the idea of a break with tradition as that of a break with traditional philosophical movements, conceptual frameworks and methodologies. But this way of understanding the imperative to break away from tradition would suggest that what was at stake was a purely theoretical issue: to break with tradition for the sake of circumventing a methodological impasse, for the sake of giving oneself the resources to

5. See p. 24 above.

6. Foucault, "Entretien avec Michel Foucault (par D. Trombadori)", p. 868.

overcome an obstacle in the search for theoretical truth. The need for change described by Foucault is not of this order. It was not merely a desire to break with traditional ways of *thinking*, but also to break away from traditional ways of *being*. It was the need to break away from traditional ways of thinking because they had rendered possible *ways of being, individually and collectively*, which recent history had shown to be ethically and politically bankrupt. The theoretical imperative to break away from *traditional theoretical movements* and *conceptual frameworks* was thus subordinated to a practical imperative to break away from *ways of being* that had proven to be ethically and politically intolerable.

Finally, the imperative in question was not merely a desire for change, a desire to steer the general mentality in a new and different direction. It was, Foucault says, “to become *completely* other in a world *completely* other.”⁷ In the aftermath of the war, Foucault felt the force of an ethical imperative for a *radical rupture* with traditional ways of thinking and of being.

3.1.1 *The Feasibility of a Radical Break from Tradition*

The idea of a radical rupture with tradition can seem problematic, or to put it bluntly, it can be off-putting. It can seem that it takes no more than a modicum of intellectual cautiousness to find the idea of an ‘*ethical imperative for a radical rupture with traditional ways of thinking and of being*’ suspect. After all, how ‘radical’ can a shift away from tradition be? How exactly is such a putative rupture to be brought about? And what is it supposed to issue into? What, in brief, is the concrete form that a ‘radical rupture’ with something as general as ‘traditional ways of thinking and of being’ is to take? Following this line of thought, it can be tempting to see the young Foucault’s desire for a radical break with tradition as an expression of naive wishful thinking and as an intellectual false start rather than as the promising starting point of a fruitful intellectual and philosophical program. So let me say a few words on why I think that if we want to be intellectually cautious, we ought

7. Foucault, “Entretien avec Michel Foucault (par D. Trombadori)”, p. 868 (my emphasis).

to take seriously even this seemingly naive project of a radical break with tradition rather than cast it aside as no more than a biographical anecdote.

First, it is important to bear in mind that for present purposes, the question to ask is not whether or not that kind of radical rupture is feasible, and consequently, whether or not attempting the project of bringing about such a rupture is to be dismissed on grounds of intellectual naiveté. The pressing questions are rather: how did the fact that in the early 1950s a radical break with traditional ways of thinking and being seemed desirable to Foucault contribute to the development of his intellectual project? How did it contribute to Foucault's susceptibility of the Nietzschean influence?

Second, we might do well to bear in mind the possibility that what strikes us as a naive intellectual non-starter today might have struck anyone in the post-war setting as an obvious condition *sine qua non* for any intellectual project. To put it differently, what may strike us, today, on conceptual and intellectual grounds, as a naive and hopeless wish to break free from tradition, may have struck the French intelligentsia, in the aftermath of the war, on ethical and political grounds, as the uncompromisable need to break free from a perspective that made fascism and the French collaboration possible. This observation does not, needless to say, make an uncritical attempt to carry out that ethical and political agenda seem any less *intellectually* naive and hopeless. But first, once the ethical and political stakes of that project are brought into view, we might be less inclined to interpret someone's engagement in that project as the result of a lack of intellectual rigor on their part before we considering the particular way in which they pursued that project, and second, once we consider the particular way in which Foucault embarked in this project, it will become clear that there is no place for the accusation of lack of intellectual rigor. Foucault's mode of engagement with this program was neither naive or dogmatic. It was, from the outset, reflexive and critical. The aforementioned questions and concerns about the possibility of a radical break with the past were by no means alien to him. On the contrary, it is not inaccurate to describe his whole intellectual trajectory as a sustained and systematic exploration of *the possibility* of

an ethically and politically motivated break from the ways of thinking and being that make us think how we think, do what we do and be who we are (individually and collectively). That his intellectual project continued to be driven by this desire for change is made clear in a series of texts and interviews from the 1980s. For instance, in the third volume of the *History of Sexuality*, he writes:

Mais qu'est-ce donc que la philosophie aujourd'hui, je veux dire l'activité philosophique, si elle n'est pas le travail critique de la pensée sur elle-même ? Et si elle ne consiste pas, au lieu de légitimer ce qu'on sait déjà, à entreprendre de savoir comment et jusqu'où il serait possible de penser autrement.⁸

Furthermore, that Foucault's engagement with the *possibility* of bringing about such change was indeed subtle and systematic is evinced by the fact that he would eventually abandon the view that a radical break was either practically possible or ethically and politically fruitful, proposing instead, in one of his most celebrated articles, the one that comes perhaps closest to a description of his own political and ethical commitments, *What is Enlightenment*, that we should “turn away from all programs that claim to be global or radical,”^{9, 10} He continues:

In fact, we know from the experience that the claim to escape from the system of contemporary reality so as to produce the overall programs of another society, of another way of thinking, another culture, another vision of the world, has led only to the return of the most dangerous traditions.

I prefer the very specific transformations that have proved to be possible in the last twenty years in a certain number of areas which concern our ways of being

8. Michel Foucault. *Histoire de la sexualité: Le souci de soi*. Gallimard, 1984, p. 15.

9. Michel Foucault. “What is Enlightenment?” In: *The Foucault Reader*. Pantheon, 1984. Chap. 1, pp. 32–50, p. 316.

10. “[C]ette ontologie historique de nous-mêmes doit se détourner de tous ces projets qui prétendent être globaux et radicaux” (Michel Foucault. “Qu'est-ce que les lumières?” In: *Dits et écrits*. Vol. II. Gallimard, 1984, 2001. Chap. 339, pp. 1381–1397, p. 1387).

and thinking, relations to authority, relations between the sexes, the way in which we perceive insanity or illness; I prefer even these partial transformations, which have been made through the combination of historical analysis and the practical attitude, to the programs for a new man that the worse political systems have repeated throughout the twentieth century.^{11,12}

Through his critical engagement with the idea of a radical break with tradition, Foucault would thus come to understand that what was required in order to bring about the kind of transformation that seemed politically and ethically necessary in the aftermath of the war was not a radical break with tradition, but the attainment of what in *What is Enlightenment*, Kant had referred to as state of majority,¹³ a commitment to undertake the conduct of ourselves by an adequate exercise of reason, by what Foucault would come to refer to as “the indefinite labor of freedom.”¹⁴

11. Foucault, “Qu’est-ce que les lumières?”, p. 1381.

12. In fact, we know from the experience that the claim to escape from the system of contemporary reality so as to produce the overall programs of another society, of another way of thinking, another culture, another vision of the world, has led only to the return of the most dangerous traditions. I prefer the very specific transformations that have proved to be possible in the last twenty years in a certain number of areas which concern our ways of being and thinking, relations to authority, relations between the sexes, the way in which we perceive insanity or illness; I prefer even these partial transformations, which have been made in the correlation of historical analysis and the practical attitude, to the programs for a new man that the worse political systems have repeated throughout the twentieth century. (Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”, p. 361).

13. Immanuel Kant. “Kant: Was ist Aufklärung?” In: *The Politics of Truth*. MIT Press, 2007. Chap. 1, pp. 29–39, p. 29.

14. Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”, p. 114.

3.2 Three Anchoring Points of Tradition: Truth, History, Subjectivity

The ethical and political need to break away from traditional ways of thinking discussed in the previous section deeply informed Foucault's position *vis-à-vis* the dominant philosophical and intellectual trends in the early 1950s. Such trends, as we shall see, were assessed in terms of their potential to contribute to the kind of radical self and social transformation sought by Foucault.

3.2.1 *Hegelian History and Phenomenological-Existentialist Theories of 'The Subject'*

In the 1978 interview with Duccio Trombadori, Foucault describes Hegelianism and phenomenologies of the subject as two of the dominant influences in his university education, influences from which Nietzsche, among others, enabled him to liberate himself.

Nietzsche, Blanchot et Bataille sont les auteurs qui m'ont permis de me libérer de ceux qui ont dominé ma formation universitaire, au début des années 1950: Hegel et la phénoménologie. Faire de la philosophie alors, comme du reste aujourd'hui, cela signifiait principalement faire de l'histoire de la philosophie; et celle-ci procédait, délimitée d'un côté par la théorie des systèmes de Hegel et de l'autre par la philosophie du sujet, sous la forme de la phénoménologie et de l'existentialisme. En substance, c'était Hegel qui prévalait.¹⁵

It is significant that Foucault describes these two influences as ones from which Nietzsche, Blanchot and Bataille enabled him to liberate himself. It confirms that the need for liberation, which predated the encounter with Nietzsche, was rooted in the possibility of fulfilling the ethical-political imperative to break away from tradition:

15. Foucault, "Entretien avec Michel Foucault (par D. Trombadori)", p. 867.

On désirait un monde et une société non seulement différents, mais qui auraient été un autre nous-mêmes; on voulait être complètement autre dans un monde complètement autre. Aussi bien l'hégélianisme qui nous était proposé à l'université avec son modèle d'intelligibilité continue de l'histoire n'était-il pas en mesure de nous satisfaire. Ainsi que la phénoménologie et l'existentialisme, qui maintenaient le primat du sujet et sa valeur fondamentale.¹⁶

Liberation from Hegelianism was necessary in light of its continuist philosophy of *history*, since such a conception of history ruled out the very possibility of the type of radical change that seemed ethically necessary after the war.

The break from existentialist and phenomenological views that advocated the primacy of the subject and its fundamental value was necessary on similar grounds. What was distinctive of these philosophies was the attempt to trace back various aspects of experience to the idea of a transcendental subject:

L'expérience du phénoménologue est, au fond, une certaine façon de poser un regard réflexif sur un objet quelconque du vécu, sur le quotidien dans sa forme transitoire pour en saisir les significations. [...] Le travail phénoménologique consiste à déployer tout le champ de possibilités liées à l'expérience quotidienne. En outre, la phénoménologie cherche à ressaisir la signification de l'expérience quotidienne pour retrouver en quoi le sujet que je suis est bien effectivement fondateur, dans ses fonctions transcendantales, de cette expérience et de ces significations.¹⁷

The explanatory principle of phenomenology was the phenomenological conception of an *a priori* form of subjectivity. But if experience, meaning, knowledge, etc. are grounded in the *a priori*, and therefore transhistorical, form of subjectivity, then experience, meaning,

16. Foucault, "Entretien avec Michel Foucault (par D. Trombadori)", p. 868.

17. Foucault, "Entretien avec Michel Foucault (par D. Trombadori)", p. 862.

knowledge, etc., are themselves transhistorical phenomena. By relying in the idea of an *a priori* subject as a principle, phenomenology ruled out the possibility of any substantive break with tradition and of fulfilling the imperative to become ‘completely other.’ As Foucault said in *The Ethics of the Care of the Self as a Practice of Freedom*:

Ce que j’ai refusé, c’est que l’on se donne se donne au préalable une théorie du sujet—comme on pouvait le faire par exemple dans la phénoménologie ou dans l’existentialisme—et que, à partir de cette théorie du sujet, on vienne poser la question de savoir comment, par exemple, telle ou telle forme de savoir était possible. [...] Il fallait bien que je refuse une certaine théorie *a priori* du sujet pour pouvoir faire cette analyse des rapports qu’il peut y avoir entre la constitution du sujet ou des différentes formes de sujet, et les jeux de vérité, les pratiques de pouvoir, etc.¹⁸

In brief, even prior to the encounter with Nietzsche, the imperative to break free from tradition informed Foucault’s attitude towards two of the dominant movements in the intellectual institutional setting where he was educated: Hegelianism, and phenomenological and existentialist philosophies of the subject. Hegelianism had to be resisted on account of its continuist philosophy of history; phenomenological and existentialist philosophies of the subject on account of their conception of a transhistorical, fundamental form of subjectivity. The common motivation for rejecting the two movements was that their respective conceptions of history and subjectivity worked as anchoring points for the traditional ways of thinking that Foucault thought necessary to uproot.

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18. Michel Foucault. “L’éthique du souci de soi comme pratique de liberté”. In: *Dits et écrits*. Gallimard, 1984, 2001. Chap. 356, pp. 1527–1548, p. 1537.

That the Nietzschean influence was at work in these intellectual choices should be clear.¹⁹ It was the encounter with Nietzsche that enabled Foucault to understand that in order to fulfill the ethical imperative to break away from tradition, it was methodologically necessary and factually possible to break away from the traditional conceptions of history and subjectivity that dominated the French intellectual landscape in the 1940s and 50s. Thus Foucault's insistence on the importance of Nietzsche's theory of the Overman for his own intellectual development:

Alors qu'en revanche [du thème Hégélian de la continuité de l'histoire et à la phénoménologie du sujet] le thème nietzschéen de la discontinuité, d'un surhomme qui serait tout autre par rapport à l'homme [...], avaient une valeur essentielle. Ce fut pour moi une sorte d'issue entre l'hégélianisme et l'identité philosophique du sujet.²⁰

3.2.2 Phenomenological and Marxist Critiques of Scientific Truth

If, insofar as Foucault had to develop his own project and conceptual framework largely in opposition to Hegelianism and phenomenological and existentialist theories of the subject, these can be regarded as negative influences on his intellectual development, there was a third, similarly important trend that exerted a positive influence in his career:

Quand j'étais étudiant, l'histoire des sciences, avec ses débats théoriques, se trouvait dans une position stratégique.²¹

19. For the details how Nietzsche's conceptions of history and of subjectivity influenced Foucault's, see, respectively, 3.4, p. 98, and 4, p. 123 below.

20. Foucault, "Entretien avec Michel Foucault (par D. Trombadori)", p. 868.

21. Foucault, "Entretien avec Michel Foucault (par D. Trombadori)", p. 872.

In an unpublished interview,²² Foucault points out that Husserl’s *Crisis of the European Sciences*²³ was the most fundamental text for most intellectuals of his generation.²⁴ Indeed, in addition to Hegelianism and existentialist-phenomenological philosophies of the subject, which seemed to threaten the possibility of fulfilling the ethical need for a break with tradition, there was a third, more general trend that seemed rather congenial (in principle, if perhaps not in practice) to the possibility of breaking away from tradition: the critique of science.

However, contrary to Hegelianism and existentialist and phenomenological philosophies of the subject, and in spite of the fact that it partly originated in Husserl’s work in the *Crisis*, the project of a critique of science was not restricted to any single school or philosophical movement. It was pursued from different perspectives, with different tools, for different purposes, and within different movements, most notably phenomenology and Marxism.

The Phenomenological Critique of Science

In *Life: experience and science*,²⁵ a revised version of his introduction to the English translation of Canguilhem’s *The Normal and the Pathological*,²⁶ in the context of a reconstruction of the reception of phenomenology in France, Foucault describes one of the phenomenological incarnations of the project of a critique of science:

[On pourrait trouver une ligne de partage] qui sépare une philosophie de l’expérience, du sens, du sujet et une philosophie du savoir, de la rationalité et du concept.

22. This interview is currently available ‘for consultation only’ at an archive in France. Accordingly, and regrettably, I must refrain from providing bibliographical details. However, I am confident that the interested reader should have no difficulties in identifying it.

23. Edmund Husserl. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*. Trans. by D. Carr. Northwestern University Press, 1970, 1936.

24. In this regard, see also (Michel Foucault. *L’origine de l’herméneutique de soi: conférences prononcées à Dartmouth College, 1980*. Philosophie Du Present. Vrin, 2013, p. 33).

25. Michel Foucault. “La vie: l’expérience et la science”. In: *Dits et écrits*. Vol. II. Gallimard, 1984, 2001. Chap. 361, pp. 1582–1595.

26. Michel Foucault. “Introduction par Michel Foucault à Le normal et le pathologique”. In: *Dits et écrits*. Vol. II. Gallimard, 1978, 2001. Chap. 219, pp. 429–442.

D'un côté, une filiation qui est celle de Sartre et de Merleau-Ponty; et puis une autre, qui est celle de Cavailles, de Bachelard, de Koyré et de Canguilhem. [...] C'est à travers [ce clivage] que la phénoménologie a été reçue. Prononcées en 1929, modifiées, traduites et publiées peu après, les *Méditations Cartésiennes* ont été très tôt l'enjeu de deux lectures possibles: l'une qui, dans la direction d'une philosophie du sujet, cherchait à radicaliser Husserl et ne devait tarder à rencontrer les questions de *Sein und Zeit*: c'est l'article de Sartre sur la *Transcendance de l'ego*, en 1935; l'autre qui remontera vers les problèmes fondateurs de la pensée de Husserl, ceux du formalisme et de l'intuitionnisme, [ceux de la théorie de la science];²⁷ et ce sera, en 1938, les deux thèses de Cavailles sur la *Méthode Axiomatique* et sur *La formation de la théorie des ensembles*. Quels qu'aient pu être, par la suite, les ramifications, les interférences, les rapprochements mêmes, ces deux formes de pensée ont constitué en France deux trames qui sont demeurées, pendant un temps au moins, assez profondément hétérogènes.²⁸

There were, according to Foucault, two strands of phenomenology: one was a philosophy of experience, of sense and of the subject, the other a philosophy of knowledge, of rationality, and of concepts. This opposition between two strands of phenomenology is drawn by Foucault in several other texts. For instance, in the interview with Trombadori:

Tout un côté de la phénoménologie apparaissait bien comme une mise en question de la science, dans son fondement, dans sa rationalité, dans son histoire. Les grandes textes de Husserl, de Koyré formaient [cet] autre volet de la phénoménologie, opposé à la phénoménologie, plus existentielle, du vécu.²⁹

27. Text from the original version (Foucault, "Introduction par Michel Foucault à *Le normal et le pathologique*", p. 430).

28. Foucault, "La vie: l'expérience et la science", p. 1583.

29. Foucault, "Entretien avec Michel Foucault (par D. Trombadori)", p. 872.

The Husserlian program of a historical critique of the sciences offered, at least potentially, a way to fulfill the imperative to break away from the classical ways of thinking that had proven bankrupt. But Husserl's strategy for carrying out that program, at least in its original form, had the drawback of involving the 'heavy apparatus of the transcendental subject and of phenomenology,' and as we have seen, buying into a classical conception of subjectivity seemed hardly the way to break up with traditional ways of being. Consequently, of the two phenomenology-inspired approaches to the history and critique of science, Foucault was by default inclined to favor the one that did not rely on the theory of the subject and the transcendental apparatus of classical phenomenology, and focused instead on the analysis of knowledge, rationality and concepts ("du savoir, de la rationalité et du concept").

But as mentioned above (3.2.2), the project of a critique of science was pursued in different ways within different schools and for different purposes. In addition to these classical phenomenological critiques of science, other attempts to carry out the program were developed under the influence of Marxism.

Mais un discours analogue venait aussi du camp marxiste, dans la mesure où le marxisme, dans les années qui ont suivi la Libération, avait acquis un rôle important, non seulement dans le domaine théorique mais aussi dans la vie quotidienne des jeunes étudiants et intellectuels.³⁰

The Marxist Critique of Science

Partly because of its role during the occupation, of its focus on actual, concrete, efficacious practice, and of the revolutionary promise of a radical transformation of society, Marxism seemed to promise the type of radical change to which Foucault's generation aspired.

Now, as Foucault explains in the aforementioned unpublished interview, Marxism entered the university in two main ways: on the one hand, through the Marxist phenomenologists,

30. Foucault, "Entretien avec Michel Foucault (par D. Trombadori)", p. 872.

notably Jean Toussaint-Desanti³¹ and Tran Duc Thao,³² who integrated Marxist concepts, discussions and analyses into the conceptual framework of Husserlian phenomenology; on the other hand, through academic readings of a more classical style, which took Marx's works as scholarly works, and analyzed them with traditional scholarly methods. Among the latter sort, the most influential effort to integrate Marxism into the institutional academic setting was Louis Althusser's,³³ one of Foucault's colleagues and close interlocutors at the *École Normale* in the 1950s. Between these two versions of Marxism, Foucault favored the Althusserian approach, as it was, once again, less reliant on the transcendental-subject-based apparatus of classical phenomenology.

From Foucault's perspective, the appeal of the Marxist critique of science did not depend on its compatibility with Husserl's project in the *Crisis* or with the transcendental framework on which it relied. Its appeal lied rather in the Marxist project a critique of ideology, the project of elaborating a general critique of science that would make it possible to expose the ideological elements at work in the methods and content of the sciences:

Le marxisme, en effet, se proposait comme une théorie générale du caractère scientifique des sciences; comme une sorte de tribunal de la raison qui permettrait de distinguer ce qui était de la science de ce qui était de l'idéologie. En somme, un critère général de toute forme de savoir.³⁴

Insofar as this aspect of the Marxist critique of science was an explicit and deliberate effort to break away with traditional ways of thinking that had large scale ethical and political effects, it made explicit the potential of the idea of a critical history of science as a means to bring about the type of radical rupture with tradition sought by Foucault in the early 1950s.

31. Jean Toussaint Desanti. *Phénoménologie et praxis*. Éditions sociales, 1963.

32. Tran Duc Thao. *Phénoménologie et Matérialisme Dialectique*. Minh Tan), 1951.

33. Louis Althusser. "Le retour à Hegel. Dernier mot du révisionisme universitaire". In: *La Nouvelle Critique* 20 (1950); Louis Althusser. "Note sur le matérialisme dialectique". In: *Revue de l'enseignement philosophique* 3:5 (1953), pp. 11–17; Louis Althusser. "À propos du marxisme". In: *Revue de l'enseignement philosophique* 3:4 (1953), pp. 15–19.

34. Foucault, "Entretien avec Michel Foucault (par D. Trombadori)", p. 872.

Lyssenkoism and The Problem with Marxist Metatheory

Yet the Marxist project of a critique of ideology was not unproblematic. While it made clear the potential of a historical critique of science for bringing about liberation from tradition, its implementation was based on the assumption that Marxist theory could work as a general criterion for all forms of knowledge.

The problem with this assumption became manifest in 1948 with the Lyssenko affair. Trofim Lyssenko's agricultural theories and methods had been endorsed and granted official status within Stalin's regime by the Central Committee of the Communist Party. The French Communist Party, following guidelines from Russia, had also endorsed Lyssenkoism. Yet since the latter was incompatible with Mendelian theories of heredity, its endorsement by the Party generated a forceful debate within French Marxism. As Foucault reports in the unpublished interview, it was simply not possible to defend this decision with a straight face. Certainly not at the *École Normale*, where there were people who pursued serious studies in biology and who consequently knew the relative scientific merits and demerits of each of these theories. From this perspective, the Lyssenko affair simply revealed the weakness of a Marxist theory of science which, in spite of its political or ethical appeal, came to seem naive next to the subtle historical analyses produced by French historians and philosophers of science like Koyré, Cavailles and, of particular relevance to biology, Canguilhem, whose *Knowledge of Life*,³⁵ which contained his deeply influential *Essay on the Normal and the Pathological*, had appeared in 1952. If Marxism promised the type of change that the people in Foucault's generation deemed ethically necessary, its unsophisticated theory of science secured its inability to deliver on that promise.

As Foucault reports, it was Nietzsche who offered the resources for doing so:

L'intérêt pour Nietzsche et Bataille n'était pas une manière de nous éloigner du Marxisme ou du communisme, c'était la seule voie d'accès vers ce que nous

35. Georges Canguilhem. *La connaissance de la vie*. Paris: Hachette, 1952.

attendions du communisme. Le rejet du monde dans lequel nous vivions n'était assurément pas satisfait par la philosophie hégélienne. Nous étions à la recherche d'autres voies pour nous conduire vers ce tout autre que nous croyions incarné par le communisme.³⁶

The Common Lesson: The Critique of Science

In spite of its limitations, the Marxist project of a critique of science, in conjunction with its analogues within phenomenological circles, played an important role in defining one of the main elements of the intellectual agenda of for a whole generation, and in bringing to the fore the critical tools afforded by the historical study of scientific discourse.

Cet ensemble de problèmes que j'ai sommairement décrit—et dans lequel se retrouvaient histoire des sciences, phénoménologie, marxisme—était absolument central; c'était une sorte de petite lentille où se réfractèrent les différents problèmes de l'époque.³⁷

[...]. On se demandait: dans quelle mesure l'histoire d'une science peut-elle mettre en doute sa rationalité, la limiter, y introduire des éléments extérieurs? Quels sont les effets contingents qui pénètrent une science à partir du moment où elle a une histoire, où elle se développe dans une société historiquement déterminée? D'autres questions suivaient celles-ci: peut-on faire une histoire de la science qui soit rationnelle? Peut-on trouver un principe d'intelligibilité qui explique les diverses péripéties et aussi, les cas échéant, des éléments irrationnels qui s'insinuent dans l'histoire des sciences? Tels étaient les problèmes posés tant dans le marxisme que dans la phénoménologie.³⁸

36. Foucault, "Entretien avec Michel Foucault (par D. Trombadori)", p. 869.

37. Foucault, "Entretien avec Michel Foucault (par D. Trombadori)", p. 872.

38. Foucault, "Entretien avec Michel Foucault (par D. Trombadori)", p. 873.

The question, from the perspective of Marxist and phenomenological historians and philosophers of science alike, was whether it was possible to write the history of a science without presupposing it to be the history of a predetermined movement towards ever more refined and comprehensive truths about its subject matter, predetermined in that its direction and its form would be necessitated by the nature of that subject matter. Instead of a history based on that presupposition, it seemed possible to think of the history of any given science as a movement which, while largely determined by the internal theoretical and technical goals of that science, was also considerably informed by a range of contingent facts, accidents which are largely independent of the internal goals and standards of that science.

Yet as Foucault reports, the influence of the historians of science on his own project was not direct:

Pour moi, au contraire, les questions se posaient de façon légèrement différente. C'est là où la lecture de Nietzsche a été pour moi très importante: il ne suffit pas de faire une histoire de la rationalité, mais l'histoire même de la vérité. C'est à dire que, au lieu de demander à une science dans quelle mesure son histoire l'a rapprochée de la vérité (ou lui a interdit l'accès à celle-ci), ne faudrait-il pas plutôt se dire que la vérité consiste en un certain rapport que le discours, le savoir, entretient avec lui-même, et se demander si ce rapport n'est ou n'a pas lui-même une histoire?³⁹

Foucault learned from Marxist and phenomenological approaches to the history of science that it was possible to call into question the rationality of any particular science. But it is one thing to call into question the rationality of a science, as the phenomenology-inspired historians of sciences did, by acknowledging that its development is subject to accidents external to its theoretical goals, and a different thing to call it into question by calling into question the nature and status of the truth that serves as its guiding principle. If the degree

39. Foucault, "Entretien avec Michel Foucault (par D. Trombadori)", p. 873.

of rationality of an enterprise is the degree to which the concrete form of its pursuit is dictated by its internal goals alone, then the novelty of Foucault's approach to the history of science was that it called into question the degree of rationality science by calling into question the truth that served as its internal standard.

*

In addition to the notions of history and subjectivity, the notion of truth was a third anchoring point of traditional ways of thinking that called for a critique. Like in the case of those notions, Foucault's stance toward it was of a piece with his stance toward some of the main philosophical movements in the early 1950s. But there was an important difference insofar as those movements shared a tendency to question traditional conceptions of the history of science and of scientific truth, Foucault's position toward them was not one of opposition. It was, initially, one of endorsement, and eventually, one of radicalization, a radicalization which, as we shall see in the next section, was catalyzed by Foucault's work on Nietzsche in 1953.

The Nietzschean influence, I shall argue, on Foucault can be best understood by reference to these three main anchoring points. The reading of Nietzsche in the early 1950s led Foucault to move away from a conception truth as the goal and internal standard of scientific practices and discourse, to see truth itself partially an effect of discourse and discursive practices. It also led Foucault to gain awareness, with unprecedented force, of the social and political potential of *historical discourse*, a conservative potential insofar as historical discourse, serving as one of the anchoring points of tradition, could serve to preserve practices, institutions and ways of thinking, and this in a particularly efficacious way discourse purports to be factual and descriptive. But by the same token, it also led Foucault to gain awareness of the transformative potential of a historical discourse that would take the form of a critical history, a history that would seek to challenge traditional accounts of the coming into being of

traditional ways of thinking, practices and institutions by revealing that they came into being not as a matter of historical-teleological necessity, but as a result of the accidental interplay of the more or less wide range of elements that are at work in complex and ultimately contingent historical processes.

Thus the change in Foucault's conception of history catalyzed by the reading of Nietzsche was twofold. It was, on the one hand, a move away from a conception of history as the unfolding of teleological processes (as in Hegelianism and Marxism), toward a conception of history as a series of accidental changes whose continuity is largely apparent, and whose apparent unity is itself an effect of *historical discourse*. It was, on the other hand, the realization of the political and social potential of historical discourse, both of the danger of a *conservative* historical discourse, and of the transformative potential of a *critical* discourse. It was this realization that would ultimately lead to Foucault's appropriation of Nietzsche's idea of a *historical critique* and of the genealogical method. Finally, reading Nietzsche also provided Foucault with the resources to abandon the idea of a *form of subjectivity* that is at once universal and concrete enough to serve to ground constraints on what human beings can or should think, do, and be, in favor of a conception of subjectivity as the result of historically local processes whereby individuals come to be constituted into subjects of particular kinds through their participation in historically local practices, many of which are discursive practices centered around the establishment of a particular type of relationship between individuals and certain truths that have substantive effects on what they can think, do, and who they can see themselves as being, or what amounts the same, on the kind of subjects that they can become.

In the remainder of this part of the dissertation, I will consider the Nietzschean influence on Foucault's conception of these anchoring points of tradition. The following sections (3.3 and 3.4) will focus, respectively, on Nietzsche's early influence on Foucault's conception of truth and of history. Chapter 4, the final chapter of this part, will focus on Foucault's conception of subjectivity and on the emergence and content of the concept of 'subjectivation,' one

of the centerpieces of his overall intellectual project and of his ethical views.

3.3 The Nietzschean Influence: (I) Truth

From the Transcendental Quest for Anthropological Truths About the Essence of Human Being to the Nietzschean Exposure of Truth as an Effect of Power

In the previous chapter, we saw that there was a shift in Foucault's attitude toward psychology from the first to the second parts of *Mental Illness and Personality*. And we saw that this shift corresponds to a shift from a history of science that is informed by the methodological hypothesis that the development of that science obeys the logic of its internal rationality, to a history of science marked by the rejection of that hypothesis and which seeks to call into question and problematize the rationality of science.⁴⁰

Les analyses précédentes ont déterminé les coordonnées par lesquelles on peut situer le pathologique à l'intérieur de la personnalité. Mais si elles ont montré les formes d'apparition de la maladie, elles n'ont pas pu en démontrer les conditions d'apparition. L'erreur serait de croire que l'évolution organique, l'histoire psychologique, ou la situation de l'homme dans le monde puisse révéler ces conditions. Sans doute, c'est en elles que la maladie se manifeste, c'est en elles que se dévoilent ses modalités, ses formes d'expression, son style. Mais c'est ailleurs que le fait pathologique a ses racines. Boutroux disait, dans son vocabulaire, que les lois psychologiques, même les plus générales, sont *relatives* à une "phase de l'humanité." Un fait est devenu, depuis longtemps, le lieu commun de la sociologie et de la pathologie mentale: *la maladie n'a sa réalité et sa valeur de maladie qu'à l'intérieur d'une culture qui la reconnaît comme telle.*⁴¹

40. Where importantly, to call into question and problematize something is not the same as to dispute or seek to refute it.

41. Foucault, *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, p. 71.

It was the reading of Nietzsche, in conjunction with the influence of the analyses of the french history and philosophers of science, that brought about this shift. In the early 1950s, Foucault felt the force of an ethical and political imperative for a radical break with traditional ways of thinking and of being. While he found some of the dominant movements of his time—notably some versions of the history and critique of science and in some strands of marxism—promising, he also saw their limitations: histories of science à la Canguilhem continued to consider science from an internal standpoint, holding them up to the standard of scientific truthfulness; Marxist ideological critique held them to an external standard, but it suffered from the drawback of deploying its own theory as a meta-theory. By his own retrospective account, what was required by the possibility of the kind of rupture with tradition that was his goal was a challenge to the conceptions of history, of subjectivity, and of truth that served as the anchoring points of tradition. It was at this juncture, and in these respects, that Nietzsche’s philosophy offered Foucault the conceptual and methodological resources necessary to carry out this project. In the remainder of this chapter, I will focus on Nietzsche’s influence on Foucault’s problematization of the notions of truth and history.

3.3.1 Nietzsche’s Influence on Foucault’s Conception of Truth: Truth as an Effect of Discourse

Nietzsche provided Foucault the resources to radicalize the Marxist and phenomenological project of questioning the rationality of the sciences through a shift of perspective on the nature and status of truth:

C’est là où la lecture de Nietzsche a été pour moi très importante: il ne suffit pas de faire une histoire de la rationalité, mais l’histoire même de la vérité.⁴²

Indeed, it is possible to see the whole of Foucault’s career as the gradual generalization of the insight that it is possible to look at truth as one of the contingent elements of a

42. Foucault, “Entretien avec Michel Foucault (par D. Trombadori)”, p. 873.

science rather than as the standard of its rationality, a generalization from the application of this principle to scientific discourse (psychological, medical, linguistic, economic, biological^{43,44,45}), to its application to discourse in general, and finally, to institutions and practices at large (penal, juridical,⁴⁶ ethical^{47,48,49}):

Ce qui m’a paru frappant chez Nietzsche, c’est que, pour lui, une rationalité—celle d’une science, d’une pratique, d’un discours—ne se mesure pas par la vérité que cette science, ce discours, cette pratique peuvent produire. La vérité fait elle-même partie de l’histoire du discours et est comme un effet interne à un discours ou à une pratique.⁵⁰

Truth itself is a part of the history of discourse. Truth is *like* an effect internal to a discourse or a practice. But what, exactly, does this mean?

Begin by noting that the second claim implies the first one. To the extent that truth can be likened to an effect of discourse, it can also be thought of as part of the history of discourse. So it is the second claim, the claim that truth is like an effect of discourse, that stands should take precedence. The question we need to raise in order to understand the conception of truth that Foucault developed partly as a result of his reading of Nietzsche is this: How is the claim that truth is like an effect of discourse to be understood, in a way that makes clear both the Nietzschean origin of the claim, and the fact that it is one of the central claims at work in Foucault’s intellectual project in general, and in his change of attitude toward psychology in 1953 in particular?

43. Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique; folie et déraison*.

44. Michel Foucault. *Naissance de la clinique. Une archeologie du regard médical*. Presses Universitaires de France, 1963.

45. Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*.

46. Michel Foucault. *Surveiller Et Punir: Naissance de la Prison*. Gallimard, 1975.

47. Michel Foucault. *Histoire de la sexualité: La volonté de savoir*. Gallimard, 1976.

48. Michel Foucault. *L’usage des plaisirs*. Gallimard, 1984.

49. Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité: Le souci de soi*.

50. Foucault, “Entretien avec Michel Foucault (par D. Trombadori)”, p. 873.

3.3.2 *Truth as an effect of discourse*

“Truth itself is a part of the history of discourse and is like an effect internal to a discourse or to a practice.”⁵¹ Although the claim is about discourse (and practices) in general, in order to understand its origin in the context of Foucault’s enquiry into psychology we shall do well to consider it, initially, as a claim about scientific discourse in particular. And to the extent that scientific discourse is oriented towards the formulation of scientific knowledge, we will also do well to understand the claim as one that is about discourse insofar as discourse is the vehicle of scientific *knowledge*.⁵² Furthermore, I shall, for the sake of simplicity, leave momentarily out of consideration the fact that the claim is not that truth is an effect of discourse or practices, but that it is *like* an effect of discourse or practices, and return to this crucially important qualification only towards the end of this section.

The first thing to note in connection with the claim is that it operates a substantive alteration in what we regard as the ‘traditional’ conception of the relationship between truth and discourse. On that traditional conception, a conception to which, as we saw, Foucault seemed to subscribe at the moment of composition of the *Introduction to Binswanger’s Dream and Existence*,⁵³ discourse is regarded as an effect of truth in the following sense. The goal of discourse is regarded as that of enunciating the truth. Consequently, truth is regarded as setting the aim, norm, condition and standard of evaluation of discourse. This conception of the relation between truth and discourse leaves room for the idea that discourse is not always *in fact* fully determined by truth, it leaves room for the possibility of error. But still, on this conception, any deviation of discourse from the truth is to be regarded as a failure of discourse to fulfill its own internal goal, to satisfy its own internal standard of assessment:

51. Foucault, “Entretien avec Michel Foucault (par D. Trombadori)”, p. 873.

52. This is not to say that the notions of discourse and scientific discourse, or the notions of discourse and knowledge, are generally interchangeable in Foucault’s work. I take license for these substitution insofar as they are helpful for a first approximation to the origin of the claim that truth is an effect of discourse, and insofar as Foucault’s 1978 formulation of that Nietzschean insight in terms of discourse rather than knowledge is in part the result of methodological considerations that he developed during the 60s, and hence are somewhat anachronistic.

53. See 45 above.

truthfulness. As a result, error is always regarded as a deviation of discourse from the truth that it is its function to enunciate, a truth that is ontologically prior to that discourse, that it is independent from it and cannot, consequently, be altered by that discourse. On this traditional conception, the intrinsic function of scientific discourse is to enunciate a truth that is external to and independent from it.

On the conception that Foucault came to adopt upon reading Nietzsche, this relation is, although not quite reversed, reconceived as a relation of co-dependence. Nietzsche makes the point in terms of the relation between knowledge and truth.

[La vérité] est un produit ou un effet de la connaissance. Elle n'en est pas ni la norme, ni la condition, ni le fondement, ni la justification.⁵⁴

Il y a une connaissance [un discours de connaissance] d'avant la vérité. Ce qui veut dire, non pas au sens positiviste ou génétique: que la connaissance met longtemps à rencontrer la vérité où à la découvrir, qu'elle fixe les normes tardivement; mais que la vérité est une péripétie, une invention, peut-être un détournement de la connaissance, qu'elle n'en sera ni la norme, ni l'essence.^{55,56}

This is important. That truth is an effect of discourse, 'an invention of knowledge,' thus means that truth does not determine discourse, but that discourse determines truth or more precisely, that they co-determine one another. Consequently, from this perspective, the discovery of truth is not the norm that guides the production of discourse, rather: the norm that guides the production of discourse—to which we shall turn momentarily—is also the norm that ultimately constrains what can be counted as true, and even what is a plausible candidate to be so counted.

54. Michel Foucault. *Leçons sur la volonté de savoir: cours au Collège de France, 1970-1971*. Cours de Foucault, Michel au Collège de France. Seuil - Gallimard, 2011, p. 207.

55. Foucault, *Leçons sur la volonté de savoir: cours au Collège de France, 1970-1971*, p. 205.

56. For a somewhat detailed discussion of these statements, see the Conclusion of the dissertation.

But if truth is not the norm that guides the production of discourse, what plays that role?

Truth is the kind of error without which a certain species of life could not live.

The value for *life* is ultimately decisive.⁵⁷

To say that truth is a kind of error is to say that there is confusion in what we generally conceive of as ‘the truth.’ On the traditional conception, we take truths to be claims about things as they are, and we take these claims to be true to the extent that they say, of things, that they are as they are. But in fact, according to Nietzsche, the reason that we take those claims to be true is not their fidelity to the nature of things, but the extent to which treating them as true is necessary for or makes a contribution to the preservation of our life:

It is improbable that our “knowledge” should extend further than is strictly necessary for the preservation of life.⁵⁸

In this way, the idea that truth is an effect of discourse involves a change in the relation between discourse and truth. It is not the case that discourse is an effect of truth, and that consequently discourse is defective to the extent that it is not an effect of truth. It is not the case that an error in discourse is a deviation of discourse from the truth. On the contrary, it is truth that is like an effect of discourse. Truth is not the norm of discourse. On the contrary, the norm of discourse, the norm that determines what is and what is not acceptable as discourse, is independent of and sets constraints on what can be counted as true and what can be counted as error. For Nietzsche himself, the norm of discourse is, as we have just seen, ‘the preservation of life.’ Truth is what is strictly necessary for the preservation of life, error what isn’t⁵⁹:

57. Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Will to Power*. Vintage. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011, III, §493, p. 272.

58. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, III, 494, p. 272.

59. It is important to note that the Nietzschean conception of truth is only intelligible against the backdrop

The *valuation* “I believe that this and that is so” as the essence of “*truth*.” In valuations are expressed conditions of preservation and growth. All our organs of knowledge and our senses are developed only with regard to conditions of preservation and growth. Truth in reason and its categories, in dialectic, therefore the valuation of logic, proves only their usefulness for life, proved by experience—*not* that something is true.

That a great deal of *belief* must be present; that judgements may be ventured; that doubt concerning all essential values is *lacking*—that is the precondition of every living thing and its life. We have projected the conditions of *our* preservation as predicates of being in general. Because we have to be stable in our beliefs if we are to prosper, we have made the “real” world a world not of change and becoming, but one of being.⁶⁰

Crucially, the Nietzschean idea that the norm of truth is the preservation of life is not only the idea that which statements of a language are taken to be true depends on their contribution to the preservation of life, it is the idea that even language itself, with its corresponding ontology, are dependent on their contribution to the preservation of life:

The entire apparatus of knowledge is an apparatus for abstraction and simplification—directed not at knowledge but at taking possession of things [i.e. not at truth, but at the preservation of life]: “end” and “means” are as remote from its essential nature as are “concepts.” With “end” and “means” one takes possession of the process (one invents a process that can be grasped); with “concepts,”

of the classical conception. The Nietzschean conception of truth is a conception according to which *what is taken to be the case* (i.e. what is taken to be true in the traditional sense) is revealed to be in fact *what contributes to the preservation of life*. It is a conception of truth that involves an ineliminable reference to the traditional conception. Consequently, it is not a conception of truth that seeks to replace the traditional conception of truth by a radically different one. It is one that seeks to supplement the traditional conception by revealing and highlighting a pragmatic dimension of the practice of accepting and rejecting statements as true or false that is constitutive of that practice.

60. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, III, §507, pp. 275-276.

however, of the “things” that constitute the process.⁶¹

It would of course be a mistake to think that these considerations require the reference to life to be understood only in a literal, biological sense.⁶² The norm that guides the production and acceptance of discourse is the latter’s contribution to the preservation not only of a life, but more generally, of a way of life, be that at the level of the individual, or of a whole community or culture that share a common tradition, at the level of the practices and institutions within it, and so forth.⁶³ What in each case serves as the standard of acceptability of a discourse will vary on a case by case basis, in accordance with the particularities of the type of discourse under consideration, of the social and historical context of its production, and a range of other similar factors. The central point of the Nietzschean insight is that what determines the acceptability of a discourse is not its adequacy to the purportedly discourse-independent phenomena that it seeks to describe and explain, but the preservation of something (once again, a life, a way of life, an institution, an entity, a practice) that lies beyond what strictly speaking constitutes the domain of reference of that discourse.

For instance, in the 1950s, in France, the acceptability of claims about the therapeutic efficaciousness of lobotomy depended less on their adequacy to the actual effects of lobotomy on patients than in their contribution to the preservation of the scientific status of psychology, of the place of psychology within medical institutions, of the credibility of the individual practitioners that adopted that practice, etc. Thus in the unpublished interview mentioned in the previous chapter, Foucault reports that a famous psychologist told him, early in the 1950s, that the content of the psychological sciences of the time fit in half of the hand of a child, and that this statement had a profound effect on him, leading him to raise the

61. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, III, §503, p. 274.

62. Even if that were the case for the Nietzsche of *The Will to Power*, it is certainly not the case for Foucault.

63. See, for instance, (Friedrich Nietzsche. “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense”. In: *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*. Cambridge University Press, 1999. Chap. 3, pp. 139–153).

question: how is it possible for psychology, as an institutionalized theoretical and medical practice, to have so much power, given that it has so little knowledge: “tant de pouvoir, si peu de savoir.”

If these were the main points of influence of Nietzsche on Foucault’s conception of truth, what were their implications? How did they affect Foucault’s approach to psychology and to philosophy in general, and his engagement with the project of bringing about a radical change with traditional ways of thinking?

That the norm of discourse is not truth, but the preservation of something that lies beyond the domain of objects that it purportedly seeks to describe, has two important implications in the case of discourses about human being. First, if what a certain type of discourse counts as its object is not determined by the nature of the latter but by the ‘preservation value’ of that discourse, then what the human sciences count as their object, human subjectivity in its various aspects, is not determined by a pre-existent truth about human being as it would be ‘in itself.’ It is rather determined by the ‘preservation’ value of that discourse. There is no transhistorical nature of human being as such, no *a priori* for of human subjectivity, that serves as the discourse-independent norm of those sciences. What is considered as human nature by any discourse about human being is largely determined by the contribution that that conception of human being can make to the preservation of the particular way of life and of the institutions and practices that are dominant in the particular historical setting within which that discourse emerges.

The second implication, a corollary of the previous one, is that the fact that human sciences have human being as their object implies that their result is apt to transform human being’s own self-understanding. As Foucault says: the rationality of those sciences is not determined by truth.⁶⁴ What the human sciences put forth as truths is not only determined by the ideal of truthfulness to which they subscribe, nor by a nature or essence of what they study which would itself be independent from the scientific theory and practice. The truths

64. Foucault, “Entretien avec Michel Foucault (par D. Trombadori)”, p. 873.

of the human sciences, more than those of any other sciences, have transformative effects on the reality which they seek to understand:

Est-ce qu'au fond une science ne pourrait pas être analysée ou conçue comme une expérience, c'est-à-dire comme un rapport tel que le sujet soit modifié par cette expérience? Autrement dit, ce serait la pratique scientifique qui constituerait à la fois le sujet idéal de la science et l'objet de la connaissance. Et la racine historique d'une science ne se trouverait-elle pas dans cette genèse réciproque du sujet et de l'objet? Quelle effet de vérité se produit de cette façon là? Il en découlerait qu'il n'y a pas une vérité.⁶⁵

Truth, in general, is not the norm of discourse. In particular, truth about human beings is not the norm of discourse at work in the human sciences. It could not be. Since human being is a being whose nature is determined by its self-understanding, there is no truth about its nature that could serve as the norm for discourse. Human being, subjectivity and truths about them are historically co-constituted through the practice of producing discourse about human being. This is the central insight that Foucault gained from his reading of Nietzsche. It involves a reassessment of traditional conceptions of history, subjectivity and truth: insofar as discourse and discursive practices have a history, then truth, and in particular the truth about human subjectivity, also have a history.

3.3.3 *Truth is like an effect of discourse*

Earlier on, when I began to explain the Foucault's claim that truth itself is part of the history of discourse and is like an effect of discourse, I said that it would be convenient to drop the qualification "like," and then return to it at the end of the section. We're now in a better position to understand it and its importance. Without the qualification, the claim would

65. Foucault, "Entretien avec Michel Foucault (par D. Trombadori)", pp. 873-874.

commit Foucault to a strong version of relativism, one that would, among other things, rule out his entitlement to add, after saying that there is not *one* truth:

Ce qui ne veut dire ni que cette histoire est irrationnelle, ni que cette science est illusoire, mais confirme, au contraire la présence d'une histoire réelle et intelligible, d'une série d'expériences collectives rationnelles qui répondent à un ensemble de règles bien précises, identifiables, au cours desquelles se construit autant le sujet connaissant que l'objet connu.⁶⁶

What Foucault learned from reading Nietzsche was not the self-defeating claim that scientific discourse is only determined by factors that are external to the phenomena that it seeks to account for, factors which he'd come to refer to, following Nietzsche's own usage, through the general term "power":

Si j'avais dit, ou voulu dire, que le savoir, c'est le pouvoir, je l'aurais dit et l'ayant dit, je n'aurais plus rien eu à dire puisque les identifiant, je ne vois pas pourquoi je me serais acharné à en montrer les différents rapports.⁶⁷

The lesson he learned was also not that there is no truth:

[Q]uand je parle de relations de pouvoir et de jeux de vérité, je ne veux absolument pas dire que les jeux de vérité ne soient l'un et l'autre que des relations de pouvoir que je veux [dé]masquer—ce serait une caricature épouvantable. Mon problème est, comme je l'ai déjà dit, de savoir comment les jeux de vérité, peuvent se mettre en place et être liés à des relations de pouvoir. On peut montrer, par exemple, que la médicalisation de la folie, c'est-à-dire l'organisation d'un savoir médical au tour des individus désignés comme fous, a été liée à toute une série de processus

66. Foucault, "Entretien avec Michel Foucault (par D. Trombadori)", p. 874.

67. Michel Foucault. "Le souci de la vérité". In: *Dits et écrits*. Vol. II. Gallimard, 1984, 2001. Chap. 350, pp. 1487–1497, p. 1495.

sociaux, d'ordre économique à un moment donné, mais aussi à des institutions et à des pratiques de pouvoir. Ce fait n'entame pas aucunement la validité scientifique ou l'efficacité thérapeutique de la psychiatrie: il ne la garantit pas, mais ne l'annule pas non plus. Que les mathématiques, par exemple, soient liées—d'une toute autre façon, d'ailleurs, que la psychiatrie—à des structures de pouvoir, c'est vrai aussi, ne serait-ce que par la façon dont elles sont enseignées, la manière dont le consensus des mathématiciens s'organise, fonctionne en circuit fermé, à ses valeurs, détermine ce qui est bien (vrai) ou mal (faux) en mathématiques, etc. Cela ne veut pas du tout dire que les mathématiques ne sont qu'un jeu de pouvoir, mais que le jeu de vérité des mathématiques se trouve lié d'une certaine manière, et sans que cela entame d'aucune façon sa validité, à des jeux et des institutions de pouvoir.^{68,69}

Thus, what Foucault gained through the encounter with Nietzsche's reflections on truth, from the Nietzschean idea of a critique of truth, was rather the insight that even the types of discourse that explicitly aim at truth are largely determined by factors that are external to those truths, and that the best way to examine those extra-scientific influences is by working under the *methodological hypothesis* that that discourse is not determined by truth.

Je pars de la décision, à la fois théorique et méthodologique, qui consiste à dire: supposons que les universaux n'existent pas, et je pose à ce moment-là la question à l'histoire et aux historiens: comment pouvez-vous écrire l'histoire si vous n'admettez pas *a priori* que quelque chose comme l'État, la société, le souverain, les sujets existe? C'était la même question que je posais, lorsque je

68. That Foucault writes of "games of truth" rather than of "truth" *tout court* should, by his own lights, not be taken as an indication that the truths in question are mere illusions or constructs: "*Le mot "jeu" peut vous induire en erreur: quand je dis "jeu," je dis un ensemble de règles de production de la vérité. Ce n'est pas un jeu dans le sens d'imiter ou de faire de la comédie de...; c'est un ensemble de procédures qui conduisent à un certain résultat, qui peut être considéré, en fonction de ses principes et de ces règles de procédure, comme valable ou pas, gagnant ou perdant.*" (Foucault, "L'éthique du souci de soi comme pratique de liberté", p.1544)

69. Foucault, "L'éthique du souci de soi comme pratique de liberté", pp. 1543-1544.

disais, non pas: la folie existe-t-elle? Je vais examiner si l'histoire me donne, me renvoie quelque chose comme la folie. Non, elle ne me renvoie pas quelque chose comme la folie, donc la folie n'existe pas. Ce n'était pas ça le raisonnement, ce n'était pas ça la méthode de fait. La méthode consistait à dire: supposons que la folie n'existe pas. Dès lors, quelle est donc l'histoire que l'on peut faire de ces différents événements, de ces différentes pratiques qui, apparemment, s'ordonnent à ce quelque chose supposé qui est la folie? C'est donc exactement l'inverse de l'historicisme que je voudrais ici mettre en place. Non pas donc interroger les universaux en utilisant comme méthode critique l'histoire, mais partir de la décision de l'inexistence des universaux pour demander quelle histoire on peut faire.⁷⁰

70. Michel Foucault. *Naissance de la biopolitique: cours au Collège de France (1978-1979)*. Cours de Foucault, Michel au Collège de France. Seuil - Gallimard, 2004, pp. 4-5.

3.4 The Nietzschean Influence: (II) History

From the Hegelian History of Continuous Progress to the Nietzschean Historical Critique of Thought and Forms of Experience

I have noted the negative aspects of Foucault's relation to tradition. Under the pressure of the ethical imperative to break free from tradition, it seemed necessary to take a negative stance towards three notions that seemed to serve as its main anchoring points in contemporary thought: truth, history, and subjectivity. Truth is not the norm of knowledge and discourse. History is not the continuous progressive movement of human being towards its own truth; historical discourse not a discourse that merely describes that process and which is, accordingly, the effect of those processes. Human subjectivity is not a transhistorical *a priori* form that determines the form of possible experience, of possible knowledge and of possible action. Truth is like an effect of discourse, whose norm is its value for the preservation of historically local practices, institutions, and ways of being, no less than the reality about which it is the truth. History is a complex set of discontinuous movements of formation and transformation of the multiplicity of interlocking practices, institutions and ways of being that make up the social fabric within which human being is constituted; historical discourse itself is no less an effect of history that one of the practices and institutions—and one of particular significance—that lend it form. Human being is essentially historical, its form varies from historical setting to historical setting, determined by the complex interaction of historical forces and processes, by the history of the configuration and reconfiguration of a multiplicity of overlapping and interwoven practices, including those discursive practices whereby knowledge about human being comes to be produced.

These revisions to the traditional conceptions of truth, history, and subjectivity, which served as anchoring points to traditional ways of thinking and being, seemed to afford the

opportunity for the rupture with those ways of thinking and being that seemed ethically and politically urgent to the young Michel Foucault. It no longer seemed to be the case that there were truths about what it is to be a human being that were not open to question, that there were truths about what it is to be a human being that were not, at least potentially, the possible target of criticism, revision and, ultimately, repudiation.

And begin to note the link between on the one hand, this idea of a rupture with ways of thinking and being by a reconceptualization of truth, history and subjectivity, and on the other hand, Foucault's reformulation of the nihilist slogan towards the end of his career. The nihilist formula is not, Foucault writes: "*God is dead, everything is permitted*"; it is rather a question: "*How to live if we must face up to the fact that 'nothing is true'?*" 'Nothing is true,' in quotation marks, because the shift in Foucault's conception of truth, as we have just seen, is not a move towards an unbridled form of skepticism, but a problematization of the traditional use of the concept of truth, and of the status of truths about human being.

The point of departure of that movement away from tradition, the perspective abandoned by Foucault, was a conception of the relationship between truth and subjectivity according to which there are truths about the *a priori* form of subjectivity which impose limits on and imply prescriptive claims about what human beings can and ought to think, do, and be; it was a conception of the relationship between truth and subjectivity according to which *a priori*, transhistorical facts about human nature determine a transhistorical body of *a priori* truths about human nature which in turn entail a body of transhistorical, *a priori* normative claims about correct ways of being a human subject; it was a conception of the relation between subjectivity and truth according to which the nature of human being, discourse about the nature of human being, and normative claims about human being are linked by one-directional relation of grounding: '*this being human nature, this is what can be said about human nature, so this is how human beings ought to think, behave like, and be.*'

The endpoint of that movement, the perspective that Foucault came to adopt, was one according to which subjectivity and truth, according to which what it is to be a human

subject, what can be said about what it is to be a human subject, and the norms that human beings are subject to, are linked by a relation of interdependence rather than one of one-directional dependence. It was a conception according to which ‘human nature’ is essentially historical, and thus indissociable from the historically local discourse that at once describes it and constitutes it, and which is itself indissociable from, and has no foundational precedence over, normative discourse about how human beings ought to be conducted and ought to conduct themselves. Thus, the end-point of Foucault’s movement away from tradition was one in which ‘nothing is true’ about human being that cannot and should not be the possible target of critical scrutiny; according to which ‘nothing is true’ which can serve to impose restrictions on what is permissible to individuals which cannot, at the same time, be subject to critical scrutiny. It is always possible, in the face of a given set of normative claims, to challenge those claims along with their grounds by submitting them to a historical critique of their origins, by challenging the necessity of complying with putatively universally valid norms, by bringing into view “the limits of the necessary.”

In order to see this more clearly, we will need to bring more clearly into view of Foucault’s conception of the relationship between subjectivity and truth, of the idea of a historical critique, and of the historical processes that, according to him, lead to the constitution of both alike.

3.4.1 The Historical Production of Truth and Subjectivity

As we have seen,⁷¹ when denying that on his view, history is irrational, or that there are no truths, Foucault provides a partial positive characterization of his conception of the historicity of truth and subjectivity:

[C]e serait la pratique scientifique qui constituerait à la fois le sujet idéal de la science et l’objet de la connaissance. Et la racine historique d’une science ne se

71. 3.3.2, p. 94 above.

trouverait-elle pas dans cette genèse réciproque du sujet et de l'objet? Quelle effet de vérité se produit de cette façon là? Il en découlerait qu'il n'y a pas une vérité. Ce qui ne veut dire ni que cette histoire est irrationnelle, ni que cette science est illusoire, mais confirme, au contraire la présence d'une histoire réelle et intelligible, d'une série d'expériences collectives rationnelles qui répondent à un ensemble de règles bien précises, identifiables, au cours desquelles se construit autant le sujet connaissant que l'objet connu.⁷²

This idea, the idea of a *collective experience* within which a certain conception of human being, both as knowing subject and as object of knowledge, emerges, eventually became, as we shall shortly see, the cornerstone of the conceptual apparatus developed by Foucault in order to attempt to fulfill the imperative to break away from traditional ways of being. But on Foucault's conception of history, the fact that truth is partially an effect of discourse does not imply that it is arbitrary. The elements in the series of collective experiences with which history consists obey a set of very precise and identifiable rules.

In his study of Nietzsche's work, Foucault found the tools to challenge the traditional conceptions of truth, history and subjectivity: this challenge was to be carried out by identifying, through novel forms of historical research, the sets of rules that governed the emergence of new conceptions of human being as both subject and object. In recounting his intellectual trajectory, Foucault notes that at an initial stage, it seemed to him that the best strategy for carrying out this project was the study of the new sciences, and in particular the psychological sciences⁷³:

Il m'a semblé que, pour comprendre ce processus, le mieux était d'étudier les sciences nouvelles, non formalisées, dont la constitution était relativement plus récente et qui étaient les plus proches de leurs origines et de leur urgence immédiate—

72. Foucault, "Entretien avec Michel Foucault (par D. Trombadori)", p. 874.

73. Note, in passing, that although the first systematic implementation of this project was in the *History of Madness*, all its central elements are already at work in the second part of *Mental Illness and Personality*.

ce type de sciences dont le caractère scientifique apparaissant avec le plus d'incertitude et qui cherchaient à comprendre ce qui était le moins susceptible d'entrer dans un champ de rationalité. C'était le cas de la folie. Il s'agissait de comprendre comment dans le monde occidental, la folie n'avait pu devenir un objet précis d'analyse et d'enquête scientifique qu'à partir du XVIIIe siècle, alors que l'on avait eu auparavant des traités médicaux qui concernaient, en quelques courts chapitres, les "maladies de l'esprit." On pouvait ainsi vérifier qu'au moment même où prenait corps cet objet folie se construisait également le sujet apte à comprendre la folie. À la construction de l'objet folie correspondait celle d'un sujet raisonnable qui avait la connaissance quant à la folie et qui la comprenait. Dans l'*Histoire de la folie*, j'ai cherché à comprendre cette sorte d'expérience collective, plurielle, définie entre le XVIe et le XIXe siècle, marquée par l'interaction entre la naissance d'un homme raisonnable, qui sait reconnaître et connaître la folie, et celle de la folie elle-même, en tant qu'objet susceptible d'être compris et déterminé.⁷⁴

The revision of the traditional notions of history, truth, and subjectivity led to the idea that what is taken to be true and what is regarded as 'the form of subjectivity' in any given historical setting are the result of processes that are governed by sets of rules that can be identified *through historical enquiry*. But insofar as what is taken to be true and what is regarded as a subject by an individual or a group of individuals feeds back into and informs their experience in general and their experience *of themselves* in particular, such historical enquiry can also be regarded as an enquiry into the collective experience characteristic of a given historical setting, and the historical processes from which it emerges.

Thus the revision of the traditional concepts of history, subjectivity and truth, geared towards making possible a radical break with traditional ways of thinking and being, led Foucault to the idea of a critical history of experience, or what he would come to call, a

74. Foucault, "Entretien avec Michel Foucault (par D. Trombadori)", p. 874.

critical history of *thought*. As Maurice Pinguet reports:

Avec la découverte de Nietzsche achevèrent ces années d'apprentissage. [...] Dès 1953, l'axe d'un projet d'ensemble se dessinait: une décision éthique d'esprit Nietzscheen couronnait une critique généalogique de la morale et de la science dans leur prétention de fixer l'être dans ce qu'on croit qu'il est, dans ce qu'on juge qu'il devrait être.⁷⁵

3.4.2 *The Critical History of "Thought" and of "Forms of Experience"*

I have just suggested that Foucault's attempt to discharge the ethical imperative to break away from traditional ways of being can be understood as the project of a critique of what he would eventually come to refer to as "thought" or "forms of experience." This claim is authorized by Foucault's own characterization of his lifelong project, in the entry to the *Dictionary of Philosophers*, as the project of a "historical critique of thought."⁷⁶ In order to gain a more accurate conception of that project, it will be useful to consider Foucault's technical notions of *forms of experience* and *thought* in detail.

In the *Draft of a Preface to the Second Volume Of the History of Sexuality*, published in 1984 (henceforth: the *Draft*),⁷⁷ Foucault introduced the technical notion of *form of experience* as a tool for the historical analysis of sexuality:

Mon propos était de l'analyser [i.e. la sexualité] comme une forme d'expérience historiquement singulière. Prendre en compte cette singularité historique, ce n'est pas surinterpréter l'apparition décente du terme sexualité, ni laisser croire que le mot a porté en soi le réel auquel il se réfère. C'est vouloir la traiter comme la corrélation d'un domaine de savoir, d'un type de normativité, d'un mode de

75. Pinguet, "Les Années d'apprentissage", p. 130.

76. Michel Foucault. "Foucault". In: *Dits et écrits*. Vol. II. Gallimard, 1984, 2001. Chap. 345, pp. 1450–1455, p. (1450).

77. Foucault, "Préface à l'Histoire de la sexualité".

rapport à soi; c'est essayer de déchiffrer comment s'est constitué dans les sociétés occidentales modernes, à partir de et à propos de certains comportements, une expérience complexe où se lie un champ de connaissance (avec des concepts, des théories, des disciplines diverses), un ensemble de règles (qui distinguent le permis et le défendu, le naturel et le monstrueux, le normal et le pathologique, le decent et ce qui ne l'est pas, etc.), un mode de relation de l'individu à lui-même (par lequel il peut se reconnaître comme sujet sexuel au milieu des autres).⁷⁸

Forms of experience consist in the correlation of three elements: (i) a *domain of knowledge* (with various concepts, theories and disciplines), (ii) a *type of normativity* or set of rules which allows for the parsing of behavior into various evaluative categories, and (iii) a *mode of relation to oneself*, a mode of relation between and individual and herself whereby she can recognize herself as a subject in the midst of others. Sexuality, or rather 'the victorian experience of sexuality,' is in the context regarded as a paradigm instance of a historically singular form of experience. According to Foucault, that historically singular form of experience involved the constitution of a range of possible actions and patterns of behavior as a unified domain of knowledge. It also involved a more or less corresponding configuration of the space of possible actions according to sets of rules of behavior which were based on various standards, and by reference to which actions and patterns of behavior alike could be parsed into respective evaluative dichotomies normal/abnormal (statistical standard), moral/immoral (moral standard), normal/aberrant-or-monstrous (purportedly physiological/metaphysical, but in fact morally inflected standard), natural/perverted (purportedly biological, but in fact morally inflected standard), healthy/pathological (purportedly medical, but in fact morally inflected standard), beneficial/harmful to society (purportedly socio-political, but in fact morally inflected standard), etc. Finally, the victorian experience of sexuality also involved the emergence of various ways for individuals to relate to themselves as possible subjects of various sexual acts, for the first time it became possible to think of oneself as 'sexually

78. Foucault, "Préface à l'Histoire de la sexualité", pp. 1397-1398.

healthy,' or as perverted, as the subject of unconscious desires and as the subject of actions whose apparent arbitrariness or irrationality obeyed the strict laws of the rationality of an unconscious, etc.

3.4.3 Thought as the form of action

In the same text, Foucault introduces a technical notion of *thought*⁷⁹ in connection with the notion of forms of experience. In a first step, the history of thought is characterized as the domain in which the formation, development and transformation of forms of experience can take place:

[L]a tâche était de mettre au jour le domaine où la formation, le développement, la transformation des formes de expérience peuvent avoir lieu: c'est-à-dire une histoire de la pensée.⁸⁰

Subsequently, this technical notion of thought is defined in the following terms:

Par “pensée,” j’entends ce qui instaure, dans diverses formes possibles, le jeu du vrai et du faux et qui, par conséquent, constitue l’être humain comme sujet de connaissance; ce qui fonde l’acceptation où le refus de la règle et constitue l’être humain comme sujet social et juridique; ce qui instaure le rapport avec soi-même et avec les autres, et constitue l’être humain comme sujet éthique.⁸¹

The three aspects of *thought* mentioned in the passage correspond to the three elements that constitute forms of experience. But in addition, each of these three elements is now revealed to correspond to a certain aspect of subjectivity. First, thought is what determines the configuration of the various *domains of knowledge* in any given historical setting, it is

79. In what follows, I will italicize “thought” whenever the intended reference is Foucault’s technical notion *and* this is not made clear by the context.

80. Foucault, “Préface à l’Histoire de la sexualité”, p. 1398.

81. Foucault, “Préface à l’Histoire de la sexualité”, p. 1398.

what sets into place, in its various forms, the game of truth and falsehood. To be a subject of knowledge is to be a player in that game; it is to stand in a certain relation to what is true and what is false. Therefore, that *thought* determines the configuration of the various domains of knowledge of a given historical setting implies that it also determines *what it is to be a subject of knowledge* within each of those *domains*.

Second, *thought* is what grounds the acceptance or refusal of various rules of conduct that are at work in a given historical setting. But to be a subject of action in general, and to be a social, juridical and political subject in particular, is to stand in a certain relation to the various rules of conduct at work in one's historical setting. So, in a given historical setting, *thought* determines the various ways in which it is open for individuals to behave as subjects of actions in general, and as juridical, social, and political subjects in particular. *Thought* determines the *type of normativity* at work in each given historical setting, a type of normativity that constitutes the ways in which individuals can be *social, juridical and political subjects*^{82,83}; the ways in which individuals can be subjects that stand in relations of power to other individuals and groups; the ways in which individuals can be *subjects of power*.

Finally, *thought* is what sets into place the relationship of the individual to herself and to others. Yet to be an ethical subject is to stand in a certain relationship toward oneself, as an agent whose actions and thoughts are informed by what one takes to be true and false and by the normative commitments that one undertakes or refuses to undertake. So thought determines the various ways in which, in a given historical setting, it is open for individuals to be ethical subjects. *Thought* is what determines the *mode of relationship* to herself that constitutes an individual as an *ethical subject*.

82. Michel Foucault. "Preface to The History of Sexuality, Volume II". in: *The Foucault Reader*. Random House, 1984, pp. 333–339, pp. 334–335.

83. Foucault, "Préface à l'Histoire de la sexualité", p. 1398.

In sum: thought is what determines the form of the experience that an individual or group of individuals⁸⁴ can have of a particular range of phenomena (e.g. sexuality) in a given historical setting. Yet to determine the form of experience that individuals are likely to have of a particular range of phenomena is to determine the type of subjects that individuals are likely to become relative to that range of phenomena. The historically local *thought* of a culture is what determines the collective *form of experience* that constitutes the individuals into *subjects*: into subjects of discourse and knowledge, into social, juridical and political subjects of power, and into self-constituting (with all the ambivalence of this phrase) subjects of ethics.

To say, for instance, that victorian thought determines the form of the victorian experience of sexuality is also to say that it determines what it is to be a subject of sexuality in the victorian age.

Thus Foucault further explains:

“Thought,” understood in this way, is not, then, to be sought only in theoretical formulations such as those of philosophy or science; it can and must be analyzed in every manner of speaking, doing or behaving in which the individual appears as subject of learning, as an ethical or juridical subject, as a subject conscious of himself and others. In this sense, thought is understood as the very form of action—as action insofar as it implies the play of true and false, the acceptance or refusal of rules, the relation to oneself and others.⁸⁵

Thought is the very form of action. It determines the space of possible actions in which individuals may engage, and thereby the type of subject that individuals can become relative to various registers of agency: epistemic, social and juridical, ethical.

84. Since Foucault introduces the notions of thought and forms of experience as objects of historical research one might be tempted to think that the notions are only applicable at the collective level. There are, however, no reasons to think that it is not possible to apply them also to the analysis of individual thought and experience.

85. Foucault, “Preface to The History of Sexuality, Volume II”, p. 334-335.

Furthermore, that *thought* is the very form of action has an important methodological implication:

The study of forms of experience can thus proceed from an analysis of “practices”—discursive or not—as long as one qualifies that word to mean the different systems of action *insofar as* they are inhabited by thought as I have characterized it here.⁸⁶

Since *thought* is the form of action, the study of thought, of the history of thought in its various historical configurations and transformations, is to take the form of a history of practices or systems of action, of the practices in which individuals in any given historical setting are invited to partake in, and participation into which results in their constitution as subjects of certain particular types.

3.4.4 *Historical Configurations of the Space of Possible Action: Forms of Experience and Foyers of Experience*

Foucault also presented this framework in the January 5 1983 lecture at the *Collège de France* (henceforth, the *Lecture*).⁸⁷ While the exposition of the framework in the *Lecture* largely coincides with that of the *Draft*, there are a few noteworthy terminological variants:

[C]e que j’ai essayé de faire, c’est une histoire de la pensée. Et par “pensée,” je voulais dire une analyse de ce qu’on pourrait appeler des foyers d’expérience, où s’articulent les unes sur les autres: premièrement, les formes du savoir possible; deuxièmement, les matrices normatives de comportement pour les individus; et enfin des modes d’existence virtuels pour des sujets possibles. Ces trois éléments—formes d’un savoir possible, matrices normatives de comportement,

86. Foucault, “Preface to The History of Sexuality, Volume II”, p. 334-335.

87. Michel Foucault. *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres: cours au Collège de France (1982-1983)*. Cours de Foucault, Michel au Collège de France. Seuil - Gallimard, 2008, pp. 4-8.

modes d'existence virtuels pour des sujets possibles—ce sont ces trois choses, ou plutôt c'est l'articulation de ces trois choses qu'on peut appeler, je crois, “foyer d'expérience.”⁸⁸

As before, thought and experience are characterized by reference to one another and in terms of three elements corresponding to knowledge, rules of conduct and ways of being a subject. But there are small variations in Foucault's way of referring to each of those the three elements. In the *Draft*, they are referred to as *domains of knowledge*, *types of normativity*, and *modes of relation to self*. In the *Lecture*, they are referred to as “domains of possible knowledge,” “normative matrices of behavior,” and “virtual modes of existence for possible subjects.” Foucault's language in the *Lecture* emphasizes the fact that forms of experience are to be thought of as particular configurations of the space of *possible* action, configurations which correspond to so many possible ways of being a subject: (i) domains of possible knowledge are configurations of the space of what it is possible to know, and they correspond to possible ways of being a subject of knowledge. (ii) Normative matrices of behavior are configurations of the space of possible action insofar as action is the object of normative judgements, and they correspond to possible ways of being a subject of actions insofar as they are regulated by normative judgements. (iii) Virtual modes of existence for possible subjects are configurations of the space of possible ways of thinking and relating to oneself, corresponding to different possible ways of being an ethical subject (e.g. an original sinner whose ethical goal is to purify his soul from all impurities, a pervert whose goal is to learn to acquire consciousness of his perverted unconscious desires and learn to live with them). To say that *thought* determines the form of possible experience and the concomitant possible ways of being a subject is to say that *thought*—in this technical sense—is a historically singular configuration of the space of possible experience and of the concomitant possible ways for individuals to be subjects.

88. Foucault, *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres: cours au Collège de France (1982-1983)*, pp. 4-5.

A second variation in terminology is the change from “forms of experience” to “foyers of experience.” We may think of the notion of a foyer of experience as complementary to the notion of a form of experience. The foyer is related to the form of experience like one of the focal points of a gravitational field is related to the overall field itself. Thus a foyer of experience, say sexuality, is characterized by Foucault as the subject-matter of his research, and as the point of intersection of the three elements or axes that make up of forms of experience. A foyer of experience is a particular aspect of life which comes to acquire particular importance at a particular historical moment, and around which, as a result, the form of experience characteristic of that historical moment is structured or configured. It is a point towards which the various dimensions of the lives of individuals gravitate in a given historical setting, and which thus constitutes the focal point of the form of experience of individuals in that setting: like sexuality, like the judicial and penal system, like the notion of mental illness and the corresponding notion of rationality, like economic discourse, like religious or spiritual life.

Thus the interrelated notions of *thought* and *forms of experience* are not only characterized by the three axes or parameters along which they are structured: domains of knowledge, types of normativity and modes of relation to self. They are also characterized by what within each particular historical setting comes to be perceived as the most central aspects of life. To each form of experience corresponds not only various ways of being a subject, but various topical foyers by reference to which individuals are constituted as subjects. Think, for instance, of the present centrality of identity-politics in North-American discourse, and the way in which individuals’ relationships to themselves and to one another have come to be inevitably mediated by the stance they take with respect to the truth and falsity of various statements regarding identity-politics, of their conception of the attitudes toward identity-politics that they take to be expected within their milieu and by the stance they take towards those expectations (e.g. endorsement, defiance, ‘indifference’).

3.4.5 *Critical History of Thought: A Radical Rupture with Traditional Thought or a Historical Critique of Thought?*

In the first section of this chapter (3.1), I noted that in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Foucault felt the force of an ethical and political imperative to break free from traditional ways of thinking and of being. On the other hand, I also noted, in the introduction to the chapter, that the project that Foucault developed partly as a result of his work on Nietzsche was what he would eventually come to describe as a critique of “thought” and “forms of experience.”⁸⁹ At the beginning of this section, I noted that this claim is authorized by Foucault’s own characterization of his lifelong project as a “historical critique of thought.”⁹⁰ We’re now in a position to understand the sense in which a historical critique of *thought* for which Nietzsche provided the conceptual and methodological resources can be regarded as the means to fulfill the ethical imperative to break away from traditional ways of being.

If *thought* is the form of action, to break away from a traditional way of being is to break away from the *thought* that informs it. That this is one of the central points of Nietzsche’s influence on Foucault’s is clear. Nietzsche’s conception of *critical history* in the *Untimely Meditations* provides the method for breaking with tradition:

Here it becomes clear how necessary it is to mankind to have, beside the monumental and the antiquarian modes of regarding the past, a *third* mode, the *critical*: and this, too, in the service of life. If he is to live, man must possess and from time to time employ the strength to break up and dissolve part of the past: he does this bringing it before the tribunal, scrupulously examining it and finally condemning it.⁹¹

But a problem now seems to emerge. If *thought* is the form of action, to break away from

89. See 3, p. 64 above.

90. Foucault, “Foucault”, p. 1450.

91. Friedrich Nietzsche. *Untimely Meditations*. Trans. by R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 75-76.

a traditional way of being is to break away from the *thought* that informs it. Yet if thought is the form of action *in general*, then it is also, *in particular*, the form of carrying out a critical history. Since even the activity of the critical historian is informed by traditional *thought*, the possibility of a radical break with the past—or even of any break at all—is doubtful. If an individual’s *thought* and experience are determined by the form of experience of her culture, if even her relationship to herself, the ways in which it is possible for her to become a subject, the ways in which it is possible for her to be, are determined by the form of experience characteristic of her culture, then in order for her to be able to transform herself in a way that constitutes a break away from the ways of being that are characteristic of her culture she must be able to modify the form of her experience. But that seems to amount to saying that breaking away from traditional ways of being requires that one look at oneself, at one’s culture, and at one’s tradition from a perspective that is not one’s own, or that is not even available within one’s culture and one’s tradition. It seems to amount to saying that the impossible is necessary: in order to so much as undertake the project of ‘becoming other,’ it would be necessary to already ‘be other.’

When advocating the necessity of a critical history, Nietzsche, aware of this problem, offers an elegant solution. The realization that critique consists in a gradual and slow shift of one’s perspective rather than in the impossible task of adopting an ‘external’ regard towards oneself and towards one’s own tradition.⁹²

If we condemn these [tradition rooted] aberrations and regard ourselves as free from them, this does not alter the fact that we originate in them. The best we can do is confront our inherited and hereditary nature with our knowledge, and through a new, stern discipline combat our inborn heritage and implant in

92. See, in this connection, *What is Enlightenment*, where Foucault suggests that a text where in addition, he suggests that “the historical ontology of ourselves [arguably, another name for the critical history of *thought*] must turn away from all projects that claim to be global and radical,” proposes instead “very specific” and “partial” transformations, but also acknowledges the “risk of letting ourselves be determined by more general structures” “[i]f we limit ourselves to this type of always partial and local inquir[ies]” (Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”, p. 316).

ourselves a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature, so that our first withers away.⁹³

That *thought* informs critical activity does not imply that critique is impossible, or that it cannot be radical. It only implies its success is not guaranteed by the mere desire to break free from tradition. It requires sustained and systematic work, ‘a stern discipline.’

The break away from tradition requires a historical critique of thought. Thought is constituted by domains of knowledge, types of normativity and modes of relation to the self, so the required critique of thought must take the form of a critique of these three aspects. In both the *Draft* and the *Lecture*, Foucault describes the project of a history of thought as a strategy he first developed early on in his career, when writing the *History of Madness*,⁹⁴ and which involved considerations of all three aspects of the experience of madness:

C'est en tout cas dans cette perspective que j'ai essayé d'analyser, il y a bien longtemps, quelque chose comme la folie, [...] d'étudier la folie comme expérience à l'intérieur de notre culture, ressaisir la folie, d'abord, comme un point à partir duquel se formait une série des savoirs plus ou moins hétérogènes, et dont les formes de développement étaient à analyser; la folie comme matrice de connaissances, de connaissances qui peuvent être de proprement médical, de type aussi spécifiquement psychiatrique ou de type psychologique, sociologique, etc. Deuxièmement, la folie, dans la mesure même où elle est forme de savoir, était aussi un ensemble de normes, normes qui permettent de découper la folie comme phénomène de déviance à l'intérieur d'une société, et en même temps normes de comportement des individus par rapport à ce phénomène de la folie et par rapport au fou, comportement aussi bien des individus normaux que des médecins, personnels psychiatriques, etc. Enfin, troisièmement: étudier la folie dans la mesure où cette expérience de la folie définit la constitution d'un mode

93. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, p. 76.

94. Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique; folie et déraison*.

d'être du sujet normal, en face et par rapport au sujet fou. Ce sont ces trois aspects, ces trois dimensions de l'expérience de la folie, (forme de savoir, matrice de comportements, constitution de modes d'être du sujet), que j'ai essayé, avec plus ou moins de succès et d'efficacité, de lier ensemble.⁹⁵

Furthermore, in the *Lecture*, Foucault also suggests that the three main topics of his lifelong research project were means for studying each of the three elements of a form of experience more closely. The *History of Madness* was a way of considering closely the practices for the production of knowledge in our culture; the history of penitentiary and other disciplinary practices carried out in *Discipline and Punish* was developed as a means of considering closely the norms of conduct and mechanisms of enforcement; the *History of Sexuality* the way for considering the ways in which individuals are called upon to constitute themselves as ethical subjects.⁹⁶

Foucault's overall intellectual project was an exploration of the possibility of transforming oneself through the historical critique of contemporary discourse and practices on the main focal points and elements of the form of our collective experience

3.4.6 *From the History of Mental Illness to the Historical Critique of Thought*

The idea of a critical history of thought, and the related notions of *thought* and *forms of experience*, provide the resources to understand Foucault's lifelong intellectual project. More specifically, they provide the means to bring to the fore the way in which that intellectual project emerged as a response to what in the 1950s, he regarded as an imperative to break away from traditional ways of being that had proven politically and ethically intolerable.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Foucault's change of attitude toward psychology in the early 1950s involved a change in his attitude towards truths about human nature: towards

95. Foucault, *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres: cours au Collège de France (1982-1983)*, p. 5.

96. Foucault, *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres: cours au Collège de France (1982-1983)*, p. 7.

their status, their content, their implications and their historicity. From 1953 onwards, Foucault's publications on psychology invariably ended with claims to the effect that an adequate understanding of human being in general, and of mental illness in particular, could only be attained through an inquiry into the history of psychology and of the conception of human being dominant in the cultural context within which psychological discourse emerged.⁹⁷

We also saw that there was a substantive perspectival in Foucault's approach to the study of the concept of mental illness within the text of *Mental Illness and Personality*, a perspectival shift whose pivotal point was the realization that the object of psychology was essentially historical. Madness came to be assigned the status of mental illness within a particular historical setting, and the pathologization of madness came to be seen as indissociable from a re-elaboration of the conception of human being, and the exclusionary choice to cast away every way of being that was incompatible with that conception of human being. This shift can be understood as the realization that what was commonly regarded as the scientific, transhistorical truth about the essence of human subjectivity, was in fact a historically local and mutually supported system of beliefs, normative claims, and conceptions about human essence. The truth about human being has a history: not the history of the slow but continuous discovery of ever more refined truths about a range of phenomena that is independent from the scientific discourse that seeks to understand it, but the history of a range of phenomena that is dependent and partially constituted by any discourse (whether it be scientific or not) that is taken to describe it, a range of phenomena which is as such

97. Thus, in addition to (Foucault, *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, pp. 89-90), cited above (48), consider:

Il n'y aurait dès lors de psychologie possible que par l'analyse des conditions d'existence de l'homme et par la reprise de ce qu'il y a de plus humain dans l'homme, c'est-à-dire son histoire. (Foucault, "La psychologie de 1850 à 1950", p.147)

See also

Un événement s'est produit dans tous les domaines de la connaissance qui a dérivé vers des horizons nouveaux la science contemporaine: la connaissance a cessé de se déployer dans le seul élément du savoir pour devenir recherche [...] En cessant d'être seulement savoir pour devenir recherche, la science disparaît comme mémoire pour devenir histoire[...] (Foucault, "La recherche scientifique et la psychologie", p.155)

essentially susceptible of undergoing historical transformations.

There is reason to think, as I noted, the Nietzschean influence was already at work in the second part of *Mental Illness and Personality*. On the view advocated by Foucault, the truth about human being has a history because human being itself is essentially historical. And along with the realization of the historical variability of truth about forms of human subjectivity went the realization of the historical variability of the systems of norms of behavior and evaluative standards that go in hand with truths about human being and forms of human subjectivity alike. The idea of the historicity of human being, of the truth about human being and of norms are all Nietzschean motives.

Still, *Mental Illness and Personality* was a work was commanded by Althusser, and Foucault approached the social-historical critique of the concept of mental illness that he carried out in the second part of the book from a Marxist perspective, relying on the methodology of ideological critique. But the Marxist framework, as I also noted,⁹⁸ is one that Foucault himself found by no means unproblematic. It was at this juncture that Nietzsche's work seemed to provide the resources to carry out a critique of traditional thought without relying on Marxist meta-theory. Thus, in the *Draft of a Preface to the Second Volume of the History of Sexuality*, Foucault writes:

To study forms of experience in this way—in their history—is an idea that originated with an earlier project, in which I made use of the methods of existential analysis in the fields of psychology and in the domain of “mental illness.” For two reasons, not unrelated to each other, this project left me unsatisfied: its theoretical weakness in elaborating the notion of experience, and its ambiguous link with a psychiatric practice which it simultaneously ignored and took for granted. One could deal with the first problem by referring to a general theory of the human being, and treating the second altogether differently by turning, as is so often done, to the “economic and social context”; one could choose, by doing

98. See pp. 77-82 above.

so, to accept the resulting dilemma of a philosophical anthropology and a social history.⁹⁹

The project in question was, needless to say, *Mental Illness and Personality*. The two problems correspond to two parts of the book: the first part, which an attempt to present the history of the concept of mental illness as a history of the progress of psychological discourse about mental illness that culminated into an understanding of mental illness that gave central place to the experience of madness; and the second part, and a history of the social conditions in which madness first came to be regarded as a mental illness. The two solutions that he mentions are the two frameworks on which he relied in that work: existential analysis, heavily informed by Heideggerian phenomenology, and Marxism. The Nietzschean study of forms of experience was what provided a way to avoid what was thereby revealed to be a false dilemma:

All of this bears upon the work and teaching I have labeled “the history of systems of thought [...] In what way do individual or collective experiences arise from singular forms of thought—that is, from what constitutes the subject in its relations to the true, to rules, to itself? It is easy to see how the reading of Nietzsche in the early ‘50s has given access to these kind of questions, by breaking with the double tradition of phenomenology and Marxism.¹⁰⁰

The change in Foucault’s attitude toward psychology in 1953 can thus be understood as a change in Foucault’s conception of *truth*, *history*, and of human *subjectivity*, and of the relationship between truth and subjectivity on the one hand, and *normative systems* on the other. This change is best understood as the realization of the *historicity* of truth and of *forms of human subjectivity*, and the corresponding revision of the relation between normative systems and the truths about human subjectivity that seem to support them and from which they seem to be derivable.

99. Foucault, “Preface to The History of Sexuality, Volume II”, p. 334.

100. Foucault, “Preface to The History of Sexuality, Volume II”, p. 336.

3.5 Appendix: Jaspers' Influence on Foucault's Reading of Nietzsche

In this connection, and as an aside—since fully developing this claim would take us lead us too far astray from our topic—it is interesting to note that although Foucault's remarks about the combined influence of Nietzsche and Heidegger, and to the effect that if he had not read Heidegger we would have probably not read Nietzsche,¹⁰¹ seem to suggest that Heidegger's *reading of Nietzsche* was the main influence in Foucault's own reading of Nietzsche, the facts seem to suggest that the influence of Jaspers' reading of Nietzsche was no less important and in a certain sense, more direct.

On the one hand, Heidegger's main work on Nietzsche had not yet been published by 1953. If Foucault was familiar with Heidegger's views of Nietzsche, it is likely that it was through *The Word of Nietzsche: God is Dead*,¹⁰² *Who is Nietzsche's Zarathustra?*,¹⁰³ and through Jean Wahl's 1946 introductory lectures to Heidegger's thought,¹⁰⁴ which closely follow Heidegger's *Introduction to Philosophy*, his Freiburg lectures of the winter of 1928-1929.¹⁰⁵ These sources, however, contain at best only the most general guidelines for the kind of comprehensive reading and understanding of Nietzsche that Foucault seems to have developed at the time.

On the other hand, that Foucault was an avid reader of Jaspers in the early 1950s is a well documented fact. References to the latter's work are ubiquitous in Foucault's works on psychology from the outset, and many of the themes in Foucault's approach to psychology

101. Foucault, "Le retour de la morale", p. 1522 (cited on II, p. 24 above).

102. Martin Heidegger. "The word of Nietzsche: God is dead". In: *The question concerning technology and other essays* (1977, 1943), pp. 53–112.

103. Martin Heidegger. "Who is Nietzsche's Zarathustra?" In: *The Review of Metaphysics* (1967, 1953), pp. 411–431.

104. Jean Wahl. *Introduction à la pensée de Heidegger: cours donnés en Sorbonne de janvier à juin 1946*. Librairie générale française, 1998.

105. Martin Heidegger. *Einleitung in die Philosophie*. Gesamtausgabe / Martin Heidegger. Abt. 2, Vorlesungen 1919-1944. Klostermann, 2001, 1929.

and anthropology were inspired by Jasper's analyses. In particular, the history of the notion of mental alienation in chapter 5 of *Mental Illness and Personality*, as well as the idea of a circularity in anthropological thinking,¹⁰⁶ are heavily inspired in Jaspers' considerations in *General Psychopathology*.^{107,108}

Now, the french translation of Jaspers' four-volume work on Nietzsche appeared in 1950.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, there is no doubt that Foucault was well acquainted with Jaspers' work on Nietzsche by 1953, at least well acquainted enough to have dedicated it the last section of his 1953 course on *Problems of Anthropology* at the ENS.¹¹⁰ Finally, it can hardly be a coincidence that the first three chapters of the second book of Jaspers' *Nietzsche*,¹¹¹ dedicated to what Jaspers regarded as the main themes in Nietzsche's work, are: *Man, Truth, and History and The Present Age*, and a close reading of Jasper's text reveals that the overlap is more than merely structural.

What about Foucault's own remarks in the aforementioned interview? Crucially, what Foucault says in the interview is that before having read Heidegger, Nietzsche's work had not spoken to him, that if he had not read Heidegger, he probably would have not re-read Nietzsche, and that reading them together was a shock. Unless we assume that the only way to read two authors together is by reading one through the eyes of the other, there is no reason to infer that Foucault's *interpretation* of Nietzsche was based on Heidegger's.

The point of these remarks is not that Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche did not influence Foucault's. If Foucault was familiar with Heidegger's early articles on Nietzsche's *Thus*

106. Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, p. 345.

107. Karl Jaspers. *General Psychopathology*. University of Chicago Press, 1963.

108. For the history of the notion of mental alienation see (Jaspers, *General Psychopathology*, V, §5), for the idea of an anthropological circle see (Jaspers, *General Psychopathology*, p. VI).

109. Karl Jaspers. *Nietzsche; introduction à sa philosophie: (Einführung in das Verständnis [sic] seines Philosophierens)*. Collection Tel. Gallimard, 1950.

110. Michel Foucault and Jacques Lagrange. "Cours donnés à l'École Normale (Notes par Jacques Lagrange)". Available at IMEC, call number: FCL 3.08. 1953.

111. Jaspers, *Nietzsche; introduction à sa philosophie: (Einführung in das Verständnis [sic] seines Philosophierens)*.

Spoke Zarathustra,¹¹² it is likely that these works, and various remarks on the Overman, motivated Foucault to look closer into Nietzsche's work in an effort to explore the possibility of breaking away from traditional ways of being. Furthermore, when discussing Heidegger's influence on the aforementioned interview,¹¹³ Foucault admits to not being well acquainted with *Being and Time*.¹¹⁴ This suggests that at least initially, and with the possible additions of the articles just mentioned and Jean Wahl's lectures, Foucault's access to Heidegger was largely limited to Corbin's 1951 anthology,¹¹⁵ which comprised: *What is Metaphysics*,¹¹⁶ *The Essence of Reasons*,¹¹⁷ *Being and Time*, §§46-53 and §§72-76,¹¹⁸ *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, §§42-45,¹¹⁹ and *Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry*.¹²⁰ This seems corroborated by the fact that many of Foucault's central interests throughout the 50s correspond to, and are thus likely to have been sparked by, some of the central themes developed by Heidegger in the texts collected in that anthology: (1) The question of the foundation of rationality, the topic of *The Essence of Reasons*; (2) existential analysis, the temporality of human existence, authenticity, *Dasein* and being-toward-death, which are the central themes of §§46-53 of *Being and Time*, and of which *Dasein* and being-toward-death are also reported by Maurice Pinguet to have been one of Foucault's central interests in the early 1950s; historicity and its relation to human existence, the topic of *Being and Time*, §§72-76);

112. Friedrich Nietzsche. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

113. Foucault, "Le retour de la morale", p. 1522.

114. Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*. Blackwell, 1967, 1927.

115. Martin Heidegger. *Qu'est-ce que la métaphysique?: suivi d'extraits sur l'être et le temps et d'une conférence sur Hölderlin*. Les Essais. Gallimard, 1951.

116. Martin Heidegger. "What is Metaphysics?" In: *Pathmarks*. Ed. by William McNeill. Trans. by David Farrell Krell. Cambridge University Press, 1998, 1927, pp. 82–96.

117. Martin Heidegger. *The Essence of Reasons*. Trans. by Terrence Malick. Northwestern University Press, 1969, 1929.

118. Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

119. Martin Heidegger. *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. Trans. by R. Taft. Studies in Continental thought. Indiana University Press, 1997, 1929.

120. Martin Heidegger. "Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry". In: *The Heidegger Reader*. Ed. and trans. by Günter Figal. Indiana University Press, 2009, 1936, pp. 118–129.

the relation of anthropology to fundamental ontology, and of both to Kant's critical project, the topic of *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, §§42-45.

The present point thus not that Heidegger was not a central influence in Foucault's formative years or in his reading of Nietzsche. Foucault seems to have scrutinized and been deeply influenced at least by the texts available in Corbin's anthology. The point is rather that although Foucault's reading of Heidegger did influence his reading of Nietzsche, this influence was not *mainly* through Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche. The latter only influenced Foucault by rekindling his interest in Nietzsche's work through an interest in the idea of an Overman, of a radical transformation of human being's way of being. Other than that, the influence was indirect: Heidegger seems to have sparked Foucault's interest in historicity as one of the essential traits of human being and on the question concerning the possibility of grounding a philosophical anthropology on an account of the essence of human being. But the latter would have been crucial in Foucault's reading of Nietzsche insofar as it exposed him to a range of problems whose solution was offered by Nietzsche's idea of a historical critique of the present. Contrary to common lore, in seeking to understand Foucault's understanding of Nietzsche, Jaspers' work is no less of an important source than Heidegger. But as I mentioned at the beginning of this section, that is a work that would take us too far afield from our present task, and which I will consequently leave for another occasion.

CHAPTER 4

THE HISTORICITY OF HUMAN BEING: SUBJECTIVATION

Nietzsche says: “There is no knowledge in itself,” which does not mean: There is no knowledge of the in-itself, but: In the violence of knowing, there is no constant relation, essential and prior, that the activity of knowledge should simultaneously deploy and effect. To say that there is no knowledge in itself, is to say that the subject-object relation (and all its derivatives, like *a priori*, *objectivity*, *pure knowledge*, *constituting subject*) is in reality produced by knowledge instead of serving as its ground.¹

4.1 The Nietzschean Influence: (III) Subjectivity

As we have seen, the conception of transcendental subjectivity as a transhistorical structure that set constraints on the form of possible experience, on the form of what can be thought and what can be done, was one of the anchoring points of tradition which, from Foucault’s perspective, imposed severe limitations on the kind of radical self and social transformation that he deemed ethically and politically necessary in the early 1950s. The Nietzschean theme of the historicity of human being brought into view for Foucault the possibility of bringing that project to fruition, but it also brought into view the necessity of a break with traditional conceptions of the subject, of a critique of a theory of the form of subjectivity as the ontological ground of what is possible to think and do and, by the same token, as the philosophical explanatory ground.

The goal of this chapter is to provide a systematic account of the results of Foucault’s enquiry on the concept of subjectivity in the course of his career. More specifically, to provide a systematic account of Foucault’s concept of subjectivation, of the idea of processes whereby individuals are constituted in certain types of subject. Its strategy will be to consider the development of the concept of subjectivation in Foucault’s work. The idea that the form of subjectivity is historically variable, and that in any given historical setting, it is partially constituted by the choice to treat certain forms of subjectivity as defective, and by the status assigned to those defective forms of subjectivity in discourse and practices surrounding them,

1. Nietzsche dit: “Il n’y a pas de connaissance en soi,” ce qui ne veut pas dire: Il n’y a pas de connaissance de l’en-soi, mais: Il n’y a pas, dans la violence du connaître, un rapport constant, essentiel et préalable que l’activité de connaissance devrait à la fois déployer et effectuer. Dire qu’il n’y a pas de connaissance en soi, c’est dire que le rapport sujet-objet (et tous ses dérivés comme *a priori*, *objectivité*, *connaissance pure*, *sujet constituant*) est en réalité produit par la connaissance au lieu de lui servir de fondement. *Leçons sur volonté de savoir*, p. 202.

was already implicitly at work in Foucault's thought since the composition of the second part of *Mental Illness and Personality* (see §2.2.1, p. 55 above). But as we shall see, although the idea is at the heart of Foucault's project in *The History of Madness*, a systematic account of subjectivation would not be developed until the late 1970s. In the earlier works, Foucault's emphasis was on the intimately related notion of objectivation, of processes where a new field of enquiry about human being is constituted and new sets of social practices come into being, thereby transforming human being's self-understanding and way of being. Thus the first section of the chapter (4.2) will be devoted to the notion of objectivation, and the subsequent one to the notion of subjectivation (4.3).

4.2 The Concept of Objectivation

One of the central elements of Foucault's conceptual framework is the notion of 'objectivation.' According to *Le Grand Robert*, the term "objectivation" was introduced in the French language in 1846. It was used to refer to the act of rendering something objective. In psychiatry, in particular, it was used to refer to a mental mechanism whereby someone suffering from chronic delirium would take her hallucinations to be real.² The term also appears in that sense in *Lalande's Technical Vocabulary of Philosophy* (1902). In Bergson's 1889 *Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*,³ the term is used to refer to the interpretation of the succession of images as a causal relation between the phenomena they represent. Thus Bergson's use of the term has in common with the psychiatric sense the idea of objectivation as an act whereby mental content is assigned objective value, but it differs from it in that Bergson does not use the term to refer to a defective type of mental state; his use of the term is consistent with the idea that objectivation is at work even in normal cases of perception.

Uses of the term "objectivation" were, however, comparatively rare up until the late

2. P. Robert and A. Rey. *Le grand Robert de la langue française*. Dictionnaires Le Robert v. 6. Dictionnaires Le Robert, 2001.

3. Henri Bergson. *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*. Bibliothèque de philosophie contemporaine. F. Alcan, 1889.

twenties and early thirties. It was then, with the introduction of Husserlian phenomenology in France through a series of publications by Levinas⁴ and with the deliverance and publication of the *Cartesian Meditations* that the term came to be part of the commonly used philosophical vocabulary.

In the *Cartesian Meditations*, occurrences of the term are fairly rare (the term is used only in §§57, 58 and 61), and usually accompanied by the term “acte objectivant” or “objectivating act.” The latter, coined by Husserl, was introduced in the *5th Logical Investigation* as the highest genus of mental acts or states. On Husserl’s account, an objectivating act is any act, in the sense of any actualization of consciousness, or of any conscious state, that is directed towards an object. Given the intentionality thesis that every mental act is about an object, it follows that every mental act is an objectivating act. Mental acts are said to be objectivating insofar as they consist in consciousness of an object (in the broadest possible sense of the term), in an object’s coming to be the intentional object of a particular act of consciousness. Though there were few occurrences of the term “objectivation” in the *Cartesian Meditations*, the first text by Husserl to have been published in France, that term and the related term of an objectivating act were two of the key terms of Husserlian phenomenology. They are used in Husserl’s main works (The *Logical Investigations*, *Ideen I*, and the *Krisis*), as well as in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, in Levinas’ thesis *On the Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology*,⁵ in Sartre’s *Being and Time*, and so forth.

Eventually, through its assimilation by some of the french epistemologists inspired by Husserl (Cavaillès, Bachelard and Canguilhem),⁶ the term came to be used to refer to the process whereby a phenomenon or range of phenomena comes to be constituted as an object of knowledge and discourse in general, rather than the act wherein something becomes the

4. Sur les “Ideen” de M. E. Husserl, 1929; La théorie de l’intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl (1930); Fribourg, Husserl et la phénoménologie (1931).

5. Sur les “Ideen” de M. E. Husserl, 1929; La théorie de l’intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl (1930).

6. Those, note in passing, of the conceptual approach to the phenomenological critique of science which, as we saw in the previous chapter, Foucault favored over the alternative.

object of an singular act of an individual consciousness.

It is in this last sense that Foucault used the term. Thus, in describing his philosophical project in the early 1980s for the entry on himself in the *Dictionary of Philosophers*, he wrote:

But the question is at the same time that of knowing under what conditions something can become an object of possible knowledge, how it was able to be problematized as an object of knowledge, to what procedure of analysis it has been subjected the part of it that was considered relevant [for that knowledge]. The question is thus to determine its mode of objectivation, which is also variable in accordance with the type of knowledge (*savoir*) which is at stake.^{7,8}

Various features of this passage are noteworthy for our purposes. First, in addition to describing his own philosophical project in terms of the notion of modes of objectivation, Foucault characterizes the latter by means of the Kantian phrase “object of a possible knowledge.” Indeed, throughout the whole entry in the *Dictionnaire des philosophes*, Foucault defines his philosophical project by reference to Kant’s.

Second, note that although he deploys a Kantian phrase, he puts it to a deeply unkantian use, adding the idea of ‘becoming’ to the notion of ‘object of possible knowledge.’ While Kant’s notion of possibility is suprahistorical, Foucault’s is always indexed to a particular historical moment. On Kant’s way of using the term, if something is an object of possible knowledge, it is so by virtue of the nature of human cognition, since, on this view, the nature of human cognition is not subject to historical change, it follows that if something is an object of possible knowledge, it is so independently of historical circumstances, it is so

7. “Mais la question est aussi et en même temps de savoir à quelles conditions quelque chose peut devenir un objet pour une connaissance possible, comment elle a pu être problématisée comme objet à connaître, à quelle procédure de découpage elle a été soumise, la part d’elle-même qui est considérée comme pertinente. Il s’agit donc de déterminer son mode d’objectivation, qui lui non-plus n’est pas le même selon le type de savoir dont il s’agit.” (Foucault, “Foucault”, p. 1451).

8. Michel Foucault. “Foucault”. In: *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*. Vol. 2. The Essential Works of Michel Foucault. The New Press, 1998, pp. 359–464, p. 316.

in any historical period. When Foucault writes about an something *becoming* an object of possible knowledge, he uses the notion of possibility in a narrower sense than Kant's. What is an object of possible knowledge does not depend only on the nature of human cognition in general, it also depends on various aspects of epistemological and discursive practices, practices which are, by definition, historically situated and subject to historical change.

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Although Foucault's entry in the *Dictionnaire des philosophes* is from the early 1980s, Foucault used the term "objectivation" and its cognates in the sense just described since at least as early as 1961. Thus, the term appears in the *Introduction* to his translation of Kant's *Anthropology from an Empirical Standpoint*, where he wrote:

[Kant's] texts of the 70-80 period tie the expression of the I to the possibility of being an object for oneself. But he has not clearly decided whether the I is at the root of this possibility, or whether its place is rather in the objectivation which the latter makes possible.⁹¹⁰

In a later passage of the same text, he uses the verb "objectiver" in the same sense:

Anthropology: it is knowledge of man, in a movement that objectivates him, on the level of his natural being and in the content of his animal determinations.¹¹

In both passages from the *Introduction to the Anthropology*, Foucault is interested in the objectivation of 'human being.' In the first case, in the metaphysical question whether the

9. Kant and Foucault, *Anthropologie d'un point de vue pragmatique: précédé de Michel Foucault, Introduction à l'anthropologie*, p. 41.

10. "Les textes [de Kant] de la période 70-80 lient l'expression du Je à la possibilité d'être objet pour soi-même. Mais il n'est pas clairement décidé si le Je lui-même est à la racine de cette possibilité, où dans l'objectivation qu'elle permet."

11. "L'anthropologie: elle est connaissance de l'homme, dans un mouvement qui objective celui-ci, au niveau de son être naturel et dans le contenu de ses déterminations animales." (*Anthropology from an Empirical Standpoint* p. 74.)

I is what makes the objectivation of an individual by herself possible, or whether it is the objectivation of an individual by herself that renders the I possible. Within that context Foucault is interested in this metaphysical question only insofar as it is a question that, on his view, haunted Kant during the period between the composition of the first *Critique* and the preparation of the final manuscript for the *Anthropology*, and to the extent also that, in his view, Kant's texts did not give, and they could not have given, a definite answer. In fact Foucault's persistent critiques of anthropology stem precisely from the idea that from a strictly Kantian perspective, this question is insoluble, that until transcendental discourse is altogether jettisoned, it is impossible to avoid the so-called 'anthropological circle.'

Thus, at least as early as 1961 Foucault the notion of objectivation is central to Foucault's thought, central insofar as it is indispensable for so much as formulating the kind of philosophical problems that would occupy him at least until the publication of *The Order of Things* in 1966.

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The term "objectivation" also appears and is one of the key terms of the first edition of the *History of Madness* in 1961:

From then onwards, madness is something other than a mere object of fear or an indefinitely renewed theme of skepticism. It has become an object. But with a particular status. In the very moment that he objectivates it, madness becomes the first of forms of objectivation: that whereby man can have an objective hold on himself. Previously "madness" designated in man the vertige of dazzlement, the moment when light is darkened for being too bright. Now, having become a thing for knowledge—at once that which is mostly interior in man, and most exposed to his gaze—madness plays the role of the great structure of transparency: which is not to say that through the work of knowledge it has become entirely

clear to knowledge; but rather that taking madness and the status of object that man has gained within it, man must be able, at least in principle, to become in his entirety transparent to objective knowledge. It is not mere haphazard, nor the effect of a simple historical disjointure, if the nineteenth century first demanded of the pathology of memory, of the will and of the person, what was the truth of memory, of the will and of the individual. In the order of this research program, there is something profoundly faithful to the structures that were elaborated at the end of the eighteenth century, and which made of madness the first figure of the objectivation of man.¹²

Foucault's use of the term "objectivation" in this passage corresponds quite exactly to his use of the term in the passage from the early 1980s. He writes of the moment where madness *became an object of knowledge* and, in this connection, of *the movement that objectivates it*. But note also that even though early on in the passage "objectivation" is applied to madness insofar as it became an object, it is the objectivation of man through the objectivation of madness that interests him. Once madness has become an object of knowledge, it is through madness, and through the status of object-of-knowledge that human being acquires within the study of madness, that human being must be able to become, at least theoretically speaking, entirely transparent to objective knowledge. As in the passage from the early eighties, Foucault uses "objectivation" to refer to the process whereby something emerges as

12. "Dès lors, la folie est autre chose qu'un sujet de crainte, ou un thème indéfiniment renouvelé du scepticisme. Elle est devenue objet. Mais avec un statut singulier. Dans le mouvement même qui l'objective, elle devient la première des formes objectivantes: ce par quoi l'homme peut avoir une prise objective sur lui-même. Jadis elle désignait en l'homme le vertige de l'éblouissement, le moment où la lumière s'obscurcit d'être trop éclatante. Devenue maintenant chose pour la connaissance—à la fois ce qu'il y a de plus intérieur en l'homme, mais de plus exposé à son regard—elle joue comme la grande structure de transparence: ce qui ne veut pas dire que par le travail de la connaissance elle se soit rendue entièrement claire au savoir; mais qu'à partir d'elle et du statut d'objet que l'homme prend en elle, il doit pouvoir, théoriquement du moins, devenir en son entier transparent à la connaissance objective. Ce n'est pas un hasard, ni l'effet d'un simple décalage historique si le XIXe siècle a demandé d'abord à la pathologie de la mémoire, de la volonté et de la personne, ce qu'était la vérité du souvenir, du vouloir et de l'individu. Dans l'ordre de cette recherche, il y a quelque chose de profondément fidèle aux structures qui ont été élaborées à la fin du XVIIIe siècle, et qui faisaient de la folie la première figure de l'objectivation de l'homme" (Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique; folie et déraison*, p.477).

an object of possible knowledge within a given cultural setting. And as in the text from the *Introduction to Kant's Anthropology*, it is the objectivation of human being in general that drives Foucault's interest:

Like general paralysis, moral insanity has an exemplary value. Its longevity in the course of the nineteenth century, the obstinate recurrence of the same discussions about these major themes, is explained because it neighbored the essential structures of madness. More than any other mental illness, it manifested this peculiar ambiguity that makes madness an element of interiority through the form of exteriority. In this sense, it is like a model for all possible psychology: it shows at the perceivable level of the body, of conducts, of mechanisms and of the object, the inaccessible moment of subjectivity, and just like that subjective moment cannot have a concrete existence for knowledge except in objectivity, the latter is in turn not acceptable and does not have any sense except by what it expresses of the subject. The suddenness, properly senseless, of the passage of the subjective to the objective in moral insanity accomplishes well beyond promises all that which psychology could wish for. It forms something like a spontaneous psychologization of man. But by the same token, it reveals one of those obscure truths which have dominated all reflexion on men through the nineteenth century: that the essential moment of objectivation, in man, is but one and the same thing with the passage to madness. Madness is the purest, the principal and the first form of the movement whereby the truth of man goes over to the side of the object and becomes accessible to a scientific outlook. Man does not become nature for man except to the extent that he is capable of madness. The latter, like the spontaneous passage to objectivity, is the constitutive moment in the becoming-object of man.¹³

13. "Comme la paralysie générale, la moral insanity a une valeur exemplaire. Sa longévité au cours du XIXe siècle, la reprise obstinée des mêmes discussions autour de ces thèmes majeurs, s'explique parce qu'elle était

Human being does not become nature for itself except insofar as it is capable of madness. As in the previous passage, Foucault here presents madness and the study of madness as providing the stepping stone for the objectivation of human being, for its coming to occupy the place of an object of knowledge, more specifically of scientific knowledge. This is a restatement of the insight which, as we saw, Foucault had already gained in 1953, according to which the constitution of the modern conception of man went in hand with the pathologization of madness.¹⁴

But here, through the discussion of general paralysis and moral insanity, the accent is placed on the aspect of human beings that is the proper material of objectivation: subjectivity or interiority. General paralysis and moral insanity are ailments in which subjectivity is either completely reduced to objectivity (general paralysis), or in which it momentarily vanishes in actions from which the subject is completely absent (moral insanity). It is insofar as both ailments consist in the reduction of a subject into an object that they provide a spontaneous psychologisation of man. As Foucault says, in becoming like an object, the mentally ill individual offers itself as an ideal object for scientific enquiry.

Thus these passages, and in particular the last one, also bear witness to the fact that Foucault's interest in the objectivation of human beings lies above all in the objectivation of human subjectivity, in the emergence of the human subject as an object of scientific

voisine des structures essentielles de la folie. Plus qu'aucune autre maladie mentale, elle manifestait cette curieuse ambiguïté qui fait de la folie un élément de l'intériorité sous la forme de l'extériorité. En ce sens, elle est comme un modèle pour toute psychologie possible : elle montre au niveau perceptible des corps, des conduites, des mécanismes et de l'objet, le moment inaccessible de la subjectivité, et tout comme ce moment subjectif ne peut avoir pour la connaissance d'existence concrète que dans l'objectivité, celle-ci à son tour n'est acceptable et n'a de sens que par ce qu'elle exprime du sujet. La soudaineté, proprement insensée, du passage du subjectif à l'objectif dans la folie morale, accomplit, et bien au-delà des promesses, tout ce qu'une psychologie pourrait souhaiter. Elle forme comme une psychologisation spontanée de l'homme. Mais par là même, elle révèle une de ces vérités obscures qui ont dominé toute la réflexion du XIXe siècle sur l'homme : c'est que le moment essentiel de l'objectivation, en l'homme, ne fait qu'une chose avec le passage à la folie. La folie est la forme la plus pure, la forme principale et première du mouvement par lequel la vérité de l'homme passe du côté de l'objet et devient accessible à une perception scientifique. L'homme ne devient nature pour lui-même que dans la mesure où il est capable de folie. Celle-ci, comme passage spontané à l'objectivité, est moment constitutif dans le devenir-objet de l'homme." (Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique; folie et déraison*, p. 648).

14. See 2.2.1, p. 55 above.

enquiry. From the publication of *Maladie Mentale et Personalité* and throughout his career, the objectivation of human being through the constitution of new domains of knowledge is one of the central elements of Foucault's conceptual framework.

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In this section, we have considered Foucault's appropriation of Kant's notion of *object* through a study of Foucault's notion of *objectivation*. Objectivation, as we saw, is a process whereby a new type of 'object' (or of a new domain of objectivity, as we may even say) comes to be constituted as an object or a domain of discourse. Now, to this idea of objectivation corresponds a notion of 'object,' and it is this notion of object is a variation of Kant's. More precisely, it is a variation of Kant's notion of '*object of possible experience.*' What varies from one idea to the other is the scope of the type of possibility at issue.

Kant uses "object" to refer to things insofar as they *can* be experienced, where the modality of the 'can' is as wide in scope as it gets: things insofar as they can be experienced by just any subject that shares our cognitive make-up, or to borrow a Kantian expression, by just any finite rational being. Put differently, Kant's concept of an object is the concept of what can be experienced *in principle*. And this qualification "*in principle*" does not restrict but rather lifts a restriction on the modal. It is meant to indicate that the notion applies to *any* subject insofar as she can experience something *regardless of her particular historical situation*. Every human being has the capacity to experience sexuality in the 'characteristic' early 20th century European way, but having such an experience is not a *live* possibility for every human being: such capacity can only be actualized in the concrete historical cultural context of early 20th century Europe, such an experience only came to be possible, only became a live possibility, through the complex historical processes that shaped that culture.

The notion of 'object' that corresponds to Foucault's notion of objectivation is narrower. It only applies to things insofar as they can actually be experienced by concrete individuals, where *actually* being able to be experienced means being able to be experienced in

the particular historical and cultural setting at issue. Sexuality, perversion, unconscious desires, and so forth, only became possible objects of experience through the history of their objectivation.

4.3 The Concept of Subjectivation

With this in view, we may now turn to consideration of the development of the concept of ‘subjectivation.’ After considering some of Foucault’s retrospective remarks about his attitude toward subjectivity early on in his career, I shall pay close consideration to the appearance of the term “subjectivation” and the eventual formulation of a technical sense of the term later on his career.

4.3.1 Context: The concept of the subject in mid 20th Century France

In a brief interview on the occasion of Lacan’s death 1981, when asked what changed in the French intellectual landscape after Lacan?, Foucault replied:

What changed? If I go back to the fifties, to the time when the student that I was was reading the work of Lévi-Strauss and the first texts by Lacan, it seems to me that the novelty was the following: we were discovering that philosophy and the social sciences [les sciences humaines] were living on a very traditional conception of the human subject, and that it was not enough to say, sometimes with some, that the subject was radically free, and sometimes with the others, that it was determined by social conditions. We were discovering that it was necessary to try to liberate everything that hides behind the apparently simple use of the pronoun “I.” The subject: a complex, fragile thing, of which it is so hard to speak, and without which we could not speak.¹⁵

15. Michel Foucault. “Lacan, il “liveratore” della psicanalisi (Lacan, le libérateur de la psychanalyse)”. In: *Dits et écrits*. Vol. II. Gallimard, 1984, 2001. Chap. 299, pp. 1023–1024, p. 1024.

On Foucault's conception, one of the central issues in the intellectual climate of the fifties was the realization that philosophy and the social sciences were taking for granted a traditional conception of the subject. This traditional conception was problematic for a number of reasons: the *a prioricity* and universality of the form of subjectivity, together with the fact that the form of subjectivity determined the form of experience, objectivity and knowledge, ruled out the kind of radical rupture from tradition that was regarded as ethically necessary.

Another interview provides more details on what he took to be the main internal problems with this traditional conception, as well as on the one with which he, inspired by some of his predecessors, attempted to replace it:

It was them [Blanchot, Klossowski, Bataille] who first made visible the problem of the *subject* as a fundamental problem for modern [i.e. contemporary] philosophy and thought. In other words, since Descartes up until Sartre—I don't mean this in a polemical way—, it seems to me that the subject was indeed considered as something fundamental but with which one did not mess: it was that which one did not call into question. It was probably for this reason, this is at any rate what Lacan points out, that Sartre never admitted the subconscious in Freud's sense. The idea that the subject is not the fundamental and originary form, but that the subject is formed through a certain number of processes which, in turn, are not within the order of subjectivity but an order that is evidently very difficult to name and bring into view, but more fundamental and more originary than the subject itself, did not emerge. The subject has a genesis, the subject has a [process of] formation, the subject has a history; the subject is not originary.¹⁶

16. Michel Foucault. "Tetsugaku no butai. La scène de la philosophie. Entretien avec M. Watanabe, 22 avril, 1978, Sekai, juillet, 1978". In: *Dits et Écrits*. Vol. 2. Gallimard, 1982, 2001. Chap. 234, pp. 571–595, p. 590.

According to Foucault, in France, up until the fifties, there was a conception of the subject that was taken for granted, which was not to be challenged. The conception of the subject in question was a Cartesian conception, in the sense that what is characteristic to pre-1950s conceptions of the subject is the foundational status they attributed to the subject, the role they ascribed to a theory of the subject within philosophical explanation, as well as the idea that the task of a theory of subjectivity is to bring into view *the* fixed or universal form of the subject, the form that any reasonably, all around healthy subject would instantiate. The ‘nature’ of the subject was thus taken to determine ‘the form of possible knowledge and of experience.’ The task of philosophy was regarded as that of explaining knowledge, experience, ethics, and politics in terms of a theory of the subject.

In the passages cited above, Foucault refers to the subject as a form. Though this can seem puzzling, it is only meant to reflect the fact that “subject” was used to refer to a psychological structure, a certain set of capacities articulated in a certain way: the subject has a sensibility and an understanding, the subject is capable of feeling, the subject is free, the subject is self-conscious, or such that the *I think* must be able to accompany all its representations... all capacities of ‘the subject,’ all unified in a particular way, through a certain *form*, a form that is taken to be *a priori* and to determine the layout of possible experience, the domain of possible knowledge, the space of possible truth. In short, the traditional idea of *the* subject at work in the 1950s is the idea of a fixed structure, of a fixed set of capacities articulated in a certain way, a structure that is instantiated at least in every reasonably healthy, reasonably well developed, reasonably well socialized human individual.

In light of the considerations of the previous chapter, it is not surprising that Foucault was committed to the rejection of this conception of the subject. To the extent that the subject has an *a priori* form that determines the form of thought and experience, it is not possible for any subject to break away from either. On the other hand, if subjects are formed through certain processes, then depending on the nature of those processes, it may be possible to break away and alter forms of experience.

Importantly, while Foucault's break with this traditional conception of the subject was definitive, we should be careful not to exaggerate the nature of this break. In the entry on Foucault in the *Dictionary of Philosophers*, written by Foucault himself, we find the following description of his method:

To begin with, a systematic skepticism concerning all anthropological universals, which does not mean that one rejects them all from the outset, in a bloc and once and for all, but that one ought not accept anything of that order that is not rigorously indispensable; all that is proposed to us in our knowledge [savoir], as of universal validity, regarding human nature or the categories that one can apply to the subject, calls for testing and analysis: to refuse the universals "madness," "delinquency" or "sexuality" is not to say that what those notions refer to is nothing or that they are nothing but chimeras made up according to the needs of a dubious cause; yet it is a lot more than the mere observation that their content varies according to time and circumstances; it is to interrogate oneself about the conditions that allow, in accordance with the rules of truth and falsehood, to recognize a subject as a mentally ill individual, or to make a subject recognize in the modality of his sexual desire the most essential part of himself.¹⁷

The rejection of the traditional conception of the subject is not the rejection of every aspect of the traditional conception of the subject. It is rather the refusal to take for granted any universal claims about human nature, or to take for granted the validity of the categories habitually used to describe subjects. It is to acknowledge that these categories have a history, that ways of being a subject are the result of historical processes and, as Foucault says, to interrogate ourselves about the conditions that have made possible the coming into being of our ways of conceptualizing, classifying, thinking and being subjects.

17. Foucault, "Foucault", p. 1453.

Foucault's remarks about the novel conception of the subject that saw light in the 1950s, and which is ostensibly his own, are also of interest. In opposition to the conception of the subject as an originary or fundamental form, the view that emerged, Foucault says, was one according to which "the subject has a genesis, the subject has a [process of] formation, the subject has a history"; "the subject is formed through a certain number of processes which, in turn, are not within the order of subjectivity."¹⁸ This involves two main ideas: (a) that the subject is the result of processes of genesis wherein it comes to be constituted; (b) that these processes 'do not belong to the order of subjectivity.'

In order to understand the novelty of the conception of subjectivity introduced in the 50s, it is this second idea that is essential. The first one, the idea that the subject is formed by certain processes, was by no means a novelty at that time, when the view that there is a genesis of subjectivity had become dominant: within psychoanalysis through the work of Freud and Lacan; in cognitive psychology through the work of Piaget; in philosophy, through the influence of Hegel's work on the development of absolute spirit; in phenomenology through the idea of genetic phenomenology.

And yet, all but one of these conceptions (i.e. Lacan's) still relied on a model of development that betrayed a conception of the subject as an originary and fixed form: the developmental processes within each of these theories were all conceived of as leading to a unique form of subjectivity, to a form or type of subjectivity instantiated by every normal, well-developed human individual. The various processes whereby subjects came to be formed were conceived as teleologically oriented, their final term as determined in advance by the 'nature' or 'essence' of 'the subject.'

The novelty of the new conception developed in the 50s, partially through the work of Freud and mostly through the work of Lacan, lied not so much in the claim that the form of

18. Foucault, "Tetsugaku no butai. La scène de la philosophie. Entretien avec M. Watanabe, 22 avril, 1978, Sekai, juillet, 1978", p. 590.

the subject (the ‘form’ or type of the mind of the ‘normal’ human individual) was the result of various processes, but in the rejection of a conception of these processes as regulated by internal norms alone, as all oriented towards the constitution of a unique, predetermined type of subject that was the *telos* of such processes. This is what Foucault has in mind when in the course of describing the new conception of the subject, he says that on that new conception, the processes through which subjects are formed or constituted do not belong to “the order of subjectivity.” That they do not belong to the order of subjectivity means those processes of subject formation are not reducible to sets of psychological mechanisms that are constrained by psychological laws.

Admittedly, Foucault’s characterization of those processes in that interview is at best mysterious: that they do not belong to the order of subjectivity does not really give us much of an idea of where they belong or what they are. But as we shall see in the next sections, the reference to Nietzsche is already illuminating in this regard, and if Foucault’s characterization of the processes whereby subjects are constituted was obscure at the time, it is because such processes were just beginning to become one of the focal points of Foucault’s interests. Indeed, those processes of constitution of subjects are, as we shall see, what Foucault came to refer to as “subjectivation.” And the interview took place just about two months after Foucault introduced the term in his technical vocabulary. Foucault’s way of using the term changed considerably between its first known occurrence, in the lecture at the *Collège de France* of February 22 1978, and as its last known use, in the interview with G. Barbedette published under the title *Le retour de la morale* in *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*.¹⁹ In this section, I will provide an account of the evolution of Foucault’s use of the term.

19. Foucault, “Le retour de la morale”, pp. 1524-1525.

4.3.2 *Subjectivation as the Constitution of Subjectivity*

Le retour de la morale

The last text currently published in which Foucault used the term “subjectivation” is the interview *Le retour de la morale*. In the following passage of that interview, Foucault came as close as ever to giving something like a definition of the term:

Interviewer: This subject [whose history has been at the center of your recent work] is it in your view a condition of possibility of experience?

Foucault: Absolutely not. It’s experience that is the rationalization of a process, itself provisional, which culminates in a subject, or rather, in subjects. I will call subjectivation the process whereby one obtains the constitution of a subject, more precisely, of a subjectivity, which is obviously only one of the given possibilities of organization of a self-consciousness.^{20,21}

This definition captures the central features of Foucault’s considered view of the notion of subjectivation: (i) that subjectivation is a process; (ii) that this process is impersonal; (iii) that it is a process whereby an individual, a conscience-de-soi, acquires a particular form of subjectivity or becomes a certain type of subject; (iv) that it is provisional.

The central and most important feature of this definition of the term is the idea of a *process of constitution* of a subject or of a form of subjectivity. It is this idea that we find behind many uses of the notion of subjectivation, and specially those of the later period, where Foucault deploys it within the context of discussions of ethics. Since as we saw, one of the main features of the novel concept of the subject adopted by Foucault in the 1950s as a result of the influence of authors like Freud, Lacan and Nietzsche is the idea that the subject

20. “— Ce sujet est-il chez vous condition de possibilité d’une expérience? — Absolument pas, c’est l’expérience qui est elle-même la rationalisation d’un processus, lui-même provisoire, qui aboutit à un sujet, où plutôt à des sujets. J’appellerai subjectivation le processus par lequel on obtient la constitution d’un sujet, plus précisément, d’une subjectivité, qui n’est évidemment que l’une des possibilités données d’organisation d’une conscience de soi” (Foucault, “Le retour de la morale”, pp. 1524-1525).

21. Foucault, “The Return of Morality”, p. 330.

is not an originary form, but the result of a process that does not belong to the register of subjectivity itself, this implies that the notion of subjectivation was part and parcel of this novel conception of the subject from the outset. Subjectivation is precisely the type of process that leads to the constitution or formation of subjects.

A second important feature of this definition is that it is formulated in the impersonal. Now, when considering Foucault's remarks about Lacan's influence a few pages above,²² we saw that at the time of the interview with Watanabe, in 1978, Foucault remained rather vague about the processes of subject-formation:

[T]he subject is formed through a certain number of processes which, in turn, are not within the order of subjectivity but an order that is evidently very difficult to name and bring into view, but more fundamental and more originary than the subject itself.²³

In *The Return of Morality*, Foucault is neutral about the identity of the 'agent' who operates the process of subjectivation, if such there be. Subjectivation, on this description, might be operated by someone on someone else; but it might also be operated by someone on herself, and crucially, it might be operated by an anonymous and impersonal set of more or less institutionalized practices which individuals come to partake in more or less deliberately and which contribute to their becoming the type of subjects that they are: "I will call subjectivation the process whereby *one obtains*²⁴ the constitution of a subject."²⁵ By 1984, Foucault's has developed a conception of subjectivity and of processes of subjectivation as processes which always involve an individual's participation, but in which the individual's participation can be passive or active to different degrees. The processes whereby individuals become subjects of certain kinds can be effected by the latter's participation on practices

22. See p. 134 above.

23. Foucault, "Tetsugaku no butai. La scène de la philosophie. Entretien avec M. Watanabe, 22 avril, 1978, Sekai, juillet, 1978", p. 590.

24. My emphasis.

25. Foucault, "Le retour de la morale", p. 1525.

lead by other individuals or groups, but they can also be freely operated on individuals by themselves, through the ethical choice to lend their lives a certain form, or they can be effected by more or less generalized practices that do not respond to the will of any individual or group. As we shall see in the next chapter, this neutrality between a passive and active process of constitution of subjects is deliberate.

A third feature of the definition is that subjectivation is described as a process whereby a *conscience-de-soi* is constituted into a particular form of subject. Two remarks in connection to this claim. First, Foucault speaks about a plurality of possible forms of organization of a ‘*conscience de soi*,’ of a self-consciousness. “*Conscience-de-soi*” works here as a neutral term for referring to particular individuals, neutral with respect to the form of subjectivity into which they have been constituted. The picture is thus one according to which a particular self-consciousness undergoes a process whereby it comes to be configured into one among various possible forms of subjectivity. Which form of subjectivity it is constituted into depends on the particularities of the process of subjectivation. Just like there are many possible forms of subjectivity, there are many possible forms or processes of subjectivation.²⁶ The second remark about the definition of subjectivation as a process of constitution of individuals into subjects is that we’re not to think of such processes as having two-stages, beginning with a non-subjectivized individual and yielding a fully formed subject. Foucault’s notion of subjectivation is not a notion of developmental psychology. The interest in the notion of subjectivation does not lie in what would be its ability to reconstruct the various stages whereby a individual human being matures into a fully developed subject, but in its potential to draw attention to the various forces and mechanisms that lead individuals in general to adopt the forms of subjectivity that are dominant in their culture.

26. Note in passing, that the term “conscience-de-soi” is directly borrowed from Sartre’s framework in *The Transcendence of the Ego*.

4.3.3 *The Early Years I: Subjectivation and Truth in Security, Territory, Population*

Consider the following passage from Foucault's notes for the lecture he delivered at the *Collège de France* on March 8 1978:

Identité, assoujetissement, intériorité: l'individualisation de l'homme occidental pendant le long millénaire du pastorat chrétien s'est opérée au prix de la subjectivité. Par subjectivation.²⁷

When he first incorporated the notion of "subjectivation" into his framework, Foucault used it to refer to a particular procedure of pastoral individualization.

The notion of "individualization," in turn, was first introduced in a technical term in *Discipline and Punish*, where it was used for the most part to refer to individualizing disciplinary procedures (as opposed to totalizing procedures), procedures whereby power is exercised over individuals as individuals, through the particularities of their individual history and condition, rather than merely *en masse*. If disciplinary power is "an extensive power which bears in a distinctive way over all individual bodies,"²⁸ individualizing procedures are those procedures whereby populations are organized in ways that render possible the exercise of disciplinary power upon individuals, and more specifically, upon individual bodies. It is the process whereby individual bodies become points upon which particular forms of disciplinary power can be exercised.^{29,30} Thus, in *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault characterized discipline and individualization as follows:

27. Michel Foucault. *Sécurité, territoire, population: cours au Collège de France, 1977-1978*. Cours de Foucault, Michel au Collège de France. Seuil - Gallimard, 2004, p. 237.

28. "Un pouvoir extensif qui porte de façon distincte sur tous les corps individuels" (Foucault, *Surveiller Et Punir: Naissance de la Prison*, p. 232).

29. Foucault, *Surveiller Et Punir: Naissance de la Prison*, p. 318.

30. One qualification: at the end of *The Means of Correct Training* Foucault contrasts this sense of individualization with forms of individualization whereby individuals acquired and preserved a status that enabled them to exercise power over others, and introduces a distinction between ascending et descending individualization (Foucault, *Surveiller Et Punir: Naissance de la Prison*, p. 342).

Discipline is of course also exercised on the bodies of individuals, but I have tried to show you how the individual is not the primary datum on which discipline is exercised. Discipline only exists insofar as there is a multiplicity and an end, or an objective or result to be obtained on the basis of this multiplicity. School and military discipline, as well as penal discipline, workshop discipline, worker discipline, are all particular ways of managing and organizing a multiplicity, of fixing its points of implantation, its lateral or horizontal, vertical and pyramidal trajectories, its hierarchy, and so on. The individual is much more a particular way of dividing up the multiplicity for a discipline than the raw material from which it is constructed. Discipline is a mode of individualization of multiplicities rather than something that constructs an edifice of multiple elements on the basis of individuals who are worked on as, first of all, individuals. So sovereignty and discipline, as well as security, can only be concerned with multiplicities.³¹

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Although the concept of individualization was introduced in the context of a discussion of disciplinary power, it finds its application against the backdrop of a kind of sovereign power that is exercised over a group or multiplicity of individuals as a totality. It is a mode of exercise of power, a way of governing multiplicities by governing the individuals that constitute those multiplicities. Thus its application is not a uniquely disciplinary phenomenon. Procedures of individualization are not put in place in order to render possible the exercise of disciplinary power. On the contrary, on Foucault's view, disciplinary power was developed as a technique of governing populations within the modern state through the redeployment and reconfiguration of preexisting individualizing procedures.³² Indeed, in studying discipline as

31. Michel Foucault. *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 12.

32. See, in this regard, Foucault's discussion of the relationship between pastoral power and the exercise of power in the modern state in (Michel Foucault. "The Subject and Power". In: *Power*. The New Press, 2000. Chap. 12, pp. 326-348).

a form of what he would come to call “governmentality,”³³ Foucault came upon the realization that historically, there have been two distinct conceptions of government in respect to the objects on which it bears. Government has been conceived as the government of political entities (city-states, kingdoms, etc.), but it has also been conceived as bearing on people and populations as a whole, as “the government of men.” Much of Foucault’s work in the lectures at the *Collège de France* of 1978 and 1980 is dedicated to a study of the historical origins of this phenomenon in the ideas of pastoral power and of spiritual guidance.³⁴

It was in this context that Foucault introduced the term “subjectivation” into his technical vocabulary. In its original uses, “subjectivation” referred to an individualizing procedure characteristic of pastoral power, a procedure that consisted in bringing individuals to enunciate certain truths about themselves.

Consider the closing paragraph of the February 22 1978 lecture, where Foucault introduced “subjectivation”:

Alors je terminerai en disant que, d’une part, on voit donc naître avec le pastorat chrétien une forme de pouvoir absolument nouvelle. On y voit aussi, et ce sera ma seconde et dernière conclusion, on y voit aussi se dessiner, je crois, ce qu’on pourrait appeler des modes absolument spécifiques d’individualisation. L’individualisation dans le pastorat chrétien va s’effectuer sur un mode qui est tout à fait particulier et qu’on a pu saisir à travers, justement, ce qui faisait le salut, la loi, et la vérité. C’est qu’en effet cette individualisation qui est ainsi assurée par l’exercice du pouvoir pastoral, elle ne va plus du tout être définie par le statut d’un individu ou par sa naissance ou par l’éclat de ses actions. Elle va être définie de trois manières. Premièrement par un jeu de décomposition qui définit à chaque instant la balance, le jeu et la circulation des mérites et de démérites. Disons que c’est une individualisation non pas de statut, mais d’identification

33. Foucault, *Sécurité, territoire, population: cours au Collège de France, 1977-1978*, p. 111.

34. Foucault, *Sécurité, territoire, population: cours au Collège de France, 1977-1978*, pp. 127-128.

analytique. Deuxièmement, c'est une individualisation qui va s'opérer non pas par la désignation, le marquage d'une place hiérarchique de l'individu. Elle ne va pas s'opérer non plus par l'affirmation d'une maîtrise de soi sur soi, mais par tout un réseau de servitudes, qui implique la servitude générales de tout le monde à l'égard de tout le monde et en même temps l'exclusion du moi, l'exclusion de l'ego. C'est donc une individualisation par assujettissement. Enfin troisièmement, c'est une individualisation qui ne va pas s'acquérir par le rapport à une vérité reconnue, [mais] qui, au contraire, va s'acquérir par la production d'une vérité intérieure, secrète et cachée. Identification analytique, assujettissement, subjectivation, c'est cela qui caractérise les procédures d'individualisation qui vont être effectivement mises en oeuvre par le pastoral chrétien et par les institutions du pastoral chrétien. C'est donc toute l'histoire des procédures d'individualisation humaine en Occident qui se trouve engagée par l'histoire du pastoral. Disons encore que c'est l'histoire du sujet.³⁵

“Subjectivation” is here used to characterized an act of confession, a procedure whereby an individual enunciates a certain truth about herself. This procedure is an individualizing procedure insofar as the type of truth that the individual enunciates about herself is a truth that is unique to herself and uniquely accessible to her, the truth of the inner movements of her soul, of her thoughts, her innermost desires, and so forth. The truth that she utters individualizes her. But it is also, most importantly, an individualizing procedure insofar as by coming to think of herself as the subject of such truths, to think of herself as both the enunciator and the object of those truths, and by coming thereby to understand herself and the act of enunciating those truths as key to her the well being of her soul, the individual becomes a point over which pastoral power can be exercised. Individualization through the subjectivation of truths thus carves-in a space of interiority as an enclave for the exercise of power.

35. Foucault, *Sécurité, territoire, population: cours au Collège de France, 1977-1978*, p. 187.

It is worth noting that these early uses of “subjectivation” bear a close connection to the notion of objectivation. In *Discipline and Punish*, “objectivation” is frequently used in close connection to “individualization.” It is used to refer to mechanisms whereby individuals become objects of knowledge, albeit not of knowledge in general, but of those specific kinds of knowledge that render possible the exercise of power over individual bodies: pedagogy, criminology, medicine, psychiatry.

The notion of objectivation is thus, like the notion of subjectivation, the notion of a procedure for the production of truth which facilitates the exercise of power over individuals. But if objectivation involves the production of truth about the individuals that are to be governed, it is, in a certain sense, the production of truths about individuals by other individuals, from the perspective of other individuals and for the use of other individuals. It is not, at least not directly, the production of truths about individuals by themselves and for their application to themselves. Nor does it take the form, or at any rate, not primarily, of the production by an individual of those inner truths that define her individuality. There is thus, in this regard, a substantial similarity but also an irreducible difference between the uses of the notion of objectivation and Foucault’s early uses of the notion of subjectivation. Both are procedures of individualization that involve the production of truth and facilitate the exercise of power, but while objectivation leads to the constitution of the individual as an object of knowledge for another, and ultimately, as an object on which power can be exercised by another, subjectivation leads to the constitution of the individual as a subject of knowledge for herself, and as a subject to her own power. By thus becoming a subject of her own power, she also becomes an object for the exercise of power by someone else. But as we saw, the latter possibility depends on the former. As Foucault said in the quote with which we opened this section:

The individualization of western man in the course of the long millenium of Christian pastoral was operated at the cost of subjectivity. Through subjectivation.³⁶

36. Michel Foucault. *Du gouvernement des vivants: cours au Collège de France 1979-1980*. Cours de

4.3.4 *The Early Years II: Subjectivation and Truth in The Government of the Living*

In the previous section, we saw that the study of the history of governmentality conducted by Foucault in *Security, Territory, Population*, the lecture series of 1977-1978, lead Foucault to the insight that individualization procedures, and the corresponding idea of the ‘government of men’—as opposed to the government of the city-state, or of the kingdom, etc.—could be traced back to the idea of pastoral power and of spiritual direction.

The study of these notions is the topic of the lecture series of 1979-1980: *The Government of the Living*. Within the lecture series, the notion of subjectivation reappears in Foucault’s analysis of the act of confession:

C’est d’un autre régime de vérité [que celui de la profession de foi] que je voudrais vous parler: un régime défini par l’obligation où se trouvent les individus d’établir à eux-mêmes un rapport de connaissance permanent, l’obligation où ils sont de découvrir au fond d’eux mêmes des secrets qui leur échappent, l’obligation où ils sont de manifester enfin ces vérités secrètes et individuelles par des actes qui ont des effets, des effets spécifiques bien au-delà des effets de connaissance, des effets libérateurs. Autrement dit, il y a tout un régime de vérité dans le christianisme qui s’organise, non pas tellement autour de l’acte de vérité comme acte de foi mais autour de l’acte de vérité comme acte d’aveu. Régimes très différents que ceux de la foi et de l’aveu, puisque dans le cas de la foi il s’agit de l’adhésion à une vérité intangible et révélée, dans laquelle le rôle de l’individu, donc l’acte de vérité, le point de subjectivation est essentiellement dans l’acceptation de ce contenu et dans l’acceptation de manifester que l’on accepte ce contenu—tel est le sens de la profession de foi, de l’acte de profession de foi, alors que dans l’autre cas, dans le cas de l’aveu, il ne s’agit pas du tout d’adhérer à un contenu de

Foucault, Michel au Collège de France. Seuil - Gallimard, 2012, p. 237.

vérité, mais d'explorer indéfiniment, les secrets individuels.³⁷

The notion of subjectivation at work in this passage is the same that in *Security, Territory, Population*. But the passage is of particular interest in light of Foucault's insistence in the contrast between the individual's relation to the enunciated truths in the acts of profession of faith and in the acts of confession. Very different regimes of truth, Foucault tells us, because in the case of the profession of faith what is at stake is the acceptance of a truth that is revealed and intangible, and in light of this, the point of subjectivation, the kind of relationship that can be established between the subject as the subject of the statement, as the enunciator of the truth, and the enunciated truth itself, is only one of acceptance of the latter by the former. The case of confession is different. The agent is not merely accepting a truth whose content is 'external' to her, so to speak, and whose truthfulness is established by a procedure that is independent of her: revelation. In the case of confession, the subject does not merely *adhere to* or *accept* a content that is independent from her: the subject expresses truths about her innermost self, whose source is her innermost self, and which have been extracted and could have only been extracted by her, through the indefinite exploration of her individual secrets.

The contrast is, to insist, between two kind of relations that an individual can have to the truths that she enunciates. Now, to the extent that what one takes to be true imposes constraints on what one may further take to be true, but also on how one ought to behave, the difference in these modes of relating to the truth—acceptance of an external truth, production of an internal truth—may have different types of normative effects.

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An analogous contrast is to be found in Foucault's characterization of spiritual direction or guidance as a type of relation between two wills in its relation to the will of another. Rele-

37. Foucault, *Du gouvernement des vivants: cours au Collège de France 1979-1980*, p. 82.

vantly, in describing that relation, Foucault provides a definition of subjectivation, although one that is somewhat different than the two definitions that we've considered thus far:

[S]i on appelle subjectivation la formation d'un rapport défini de soi à soi, on peut dire que la direction, c'est une technique qui consiste à lier deux volontés de façon qu'elles restent l'une par rapport à l'autre toujours libres, à les lier de façon telle que l'une veuille ce que veut l'autre, et ceci à des fins de subjectivation, c'est-à-dire d'accès à un certain rapport de soi à soi. L'autre et la volonté de l'autre sont par moi acceptés librement pour que je puisse établir de moi à moi un certain rapport.³⁸

Let's begin by considering the particularities of this definition of subjectivation, and subsequently return to the question of the relation between this passage and Foucault's conception of the two modes of relation to truth that correspond to acts of confession and of profession of faith.

In the passage just cited, Foucault says that it is possible to think of subjectivation as the formation of a determinate relation of self to self. The first definition of subjectivation was as "the process whereby one obtains the constitution of a subject."³⁹ The second definition was as a procedure of individualization consisting in an individual's production of a particular kind of truth about her innermost self. What is the relation between these definitions?

In the discussion of spiritual guidance, Foucault insists that the goal of the latter is the creation of a certain bond between two wills, such that both remain free, and both coincide in what they will. This, according to him, is distinctive model of the relation between two wills. It contrasts to other models of relations between an individual and another and, in particular, to the model of a transference of sovereignty from one individual to the Sovereign. There is, in the practice of spiritual guidance, "no yielding of sovereignty [...] no renunciation

38. Foucault, *Du gouvernement des vivants: cours au Collège de France 1979-1980*, p. 227.

39. Foucault, "Le retour de la morale", p. 1525.

by the individual to her own will.”⁴⁰ In acting in accordance to the will of the director, the individual is merely following her own will.

These two models of the relationship between two wills correspond to the two modes of relation to the truth in acts of confession and acts of profession of faith. In Foucault’s terms:

Le protestantisme, qu’est-ce que cela a été finalement, sinon une certaine manière de reprendre le contenu dogmatique de l’acte de foi en tant qu’adhésion à un contenu dogmatique dans la forme d’une subjectivité qui permet à l’individu de découvrir en lui même, au fond de lui-même, selon la loi et le témoignage de sa conscience, ce contenu même? Autrement dit, c’est comme opérateur de vérité, c’est comme acteur, témoin et objet de l’acte de vérité que l’individu va découvrir au fond de lui-même ce qui doit être la loi et la règle de sa croyance et de son acte de foi.⁴¹

Thus we have, on the one hand: profession of faith, acceptance of an ‘external’ truth, and submission to a sovereign: faith in a dogma, surrender of the will. And we have, on the other hand, on the case of confession: free endorsement of the inner truth that one has discovered in one’s interiority and about one’s interiority, free action in accordance to one’s will, which one has freely fused to that of another: recognition of a truth, free fusion of one’s will to the will of someone who recognizes that same truth and is pursuing the same goal, one’s own salvation. Two modes of subjectivation, involving to two distinguishable (but in the case of pastoral power overlapping) forms of subjectivity. One who is moved through dogma, whose truth she has accepted in an act of faith, who subjects her will to the will of another. Another who is moved, by inner truths that she takes herself to be the source of, to subject her will to a will that she takes to coincide with her own both in the truths that it recognizes and in the goals that it pursues. Two different forms of subjectivation, marked by a distinction whose importance can hardly be overemphasized: what the subject

40. Foucault, *Du gouvernement des vivants: cours au Collège de France 1979-1980*, p. 225.

41. Foucault, *Du gouvernement des vivants: cours au Collège de France 1979-1980*, p. 83.

in question takes to be the ultimate source of the binding force of truth, and of the laws that bind her will: another, or herself. But across this difference, a similar pattern, the individual's submission of her will to the will of another grounded on her recognition and acceptance of a truth that functions as the source of the force of the norms that bind her will.

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In *The Return of Morality*, Foucault mentioned that any given form of subjectivity is one among various possible organizations of a self-consciousness. The deployment of the notion of self-consciousness is not gratuitous. To be self-conscious in general is to stand in a relation to oneself that is mediated by one's conception of oneself. To be a subject (i.e. a self-consciousness in an organized in a particular way) is to stand in a particular relation to oneself, a relation to oneself that is mediated by one's conception of oneself (I shall explain this notion of self-conception momentarily). But if this is right, the process whereby a subject comes to be constituted is just the process whereby an individual comes to establish a certain type of relation between herself and herself, a relation that is mediated by that subject's conception of herself.

In this regard, it is possible to think of subjectivation as a process of self-constitution, so long as we're careful to keep give more weight to the passive sense of the phrase than to the active one.⁴² Subjectivation is the constitution of a self. Possibly, but not necessarily, by a self that is actively engaged in that process.

It is thus possible to think of the relation of self to self in Foucault's sense as a relation that is mediated by a conception of self. That risks sounding as though Foucault thought that a subject's relation to herself was primarily epistemic.⁴³ But in fact, the relevant

42. This distinction will be considered in detail in the next chapter (see 171).

43. Interpretations of Foucault's ethical views that center around the notion of *parrhesia* tend to fall prey to this risk.

notion of a self-conception at work here is the notion of what a subject *thinks* about herself, in the technical sense of *thought* that we encountered in chapter two.⁴⁴ It is, in other words, a conception that involves what the individual takes to know about the type of creature that she is; that involves what an individual takes to be the range of possible ways for her to behave, with the different valuations of various behaviors; and it involves, finally, the individual's own conception of herself as an individual (a conception that will be the topic of the next chapter).

Foucault's various uses of "subjectivation" from 1978 onwards thus overlap on the idea of processes whereby individual's come to be constituted into subjects of a certain type through their engagement in various practices. The differences can be explained away in terms of their origins and the various aspects of them that Foucault sought to emphasize in each of those contexts.

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This completes our examination of Foucault's Nietzschean reconceptualization of what he identified as the three anchoring points of traditional ways of thinking and of being: truth, history, and subjectivity. But furthermore, it suggests that the concept of subjectivation, of self-constitution, is one of the centerpieces of Foucault's ethical thought. Insofar as being an ethical subject is being an ethical *subject*, our ethical lives, our ethical *thought*, the *form of our ethical experience*, are largely determined by processes of subjectivation, processes whereby we come to be *more* or *less* actively or passively constituted into ethical subjects. With these resources at our disposal, we will now turn to the examination of Foucault's views about the general form of ethical experience, his conception of various forms of ethical subjectivation, and his views about how we might undertake the project of actively and autonomously constituting ourselves as ethical subjects.

44. See 3.4.3, p. 105, above.

Part III

Foucault's Ethical Framework

CHAPTER 5

THE FORM OF MORAL CONDUCT, FREEDOM, CRITIQUE

Peut-être notre problème est-il maintenant de découvrir que le soi n'est rien d'autre que le corrélatif historique de la technologie construite au cours de notre histoire.¹

In the preface to the second volume of *The History of Sexuality* and in the interview *On the Genealogy of Ethics*, Foucault introduces a methodological tool for the study of “the forms and transformations of a ‘morality’ [d’une “morale”].”² Although originally devised for the study of the history of morality, there are several reasons to regard this methodological tool as a framework for thinking about morality or ethics in general.³

The framework, I shall argue, is best understood as a conceptual framework for the description of *forms of moral conduct*, where a form of moral conduct is a possible *form of ethical experience*, or a possible form of *thought* about ethics, in the technical senses of those terms defined in chapter 3.⁴ The framework, as we shall see, is largely based on Foucault’s notion of *subjectivation* and the corresponding conception of *subjectivity*, in that it relies on the basic idea that being an ethical subject is the result of more or less passive or active processes through which individuals come to be constituted into subjects of a certain kind.

This basic idea raises a question as to the conditions under which a process of self-constitution can be said to be more or less active. Active self-constitution, as we shall see, requires, but is not guaranteed by, an active and sustained engagement on the part of the self-constituting individual to constitute herself as a free subject. On Foucault’s account, *freedom* is an achievement, ethics “the considered form that freedom takes when informed by reflection.”⁵

Foucault’s conceptions of freedom, subjectivity, subjectivation or self-constitution, thought, experience and conduct are interdependent, and they can be jointly taken to constitute a

1. Foucault, *L’origine de l’herméneutique de soi: conférences prononcées à Dartmouth College, 1980*, p. 90.

2. Foucault, *L’usage des plaisirs*, p. 36.

3. My presentation of this framework is substantially based on (Arnold I. Davidson. “Archaeology, Genealogy, Ethics”. In: *Foucault: A Critical Reader*. Wiley, 1986, pp. 221–233).

4. See 3.4.2, p. 103.

5. Foucault, “L’éthique du souci de soi comme pratique de liberté”, p. 1525.

conception of human reason and rational agency, what I call the *perspectivist conception of reason*. The central claim of the perspectivist conception of reason is that there is no perspective-independent *telos* characteristic of human being as such: rationality is in itself teleologically neutral, with the corollary that there are no perspective-independent normative claims: rationality, being teleologically neutral, is also normatively neutral. Thus, even if it were possible, the adoption of a purely rational, completely neutral, or purely impartial standpoint would render a deliberator unable to make normative claims. The undertaking of a normative commitment (and the acceptance of something as an end) can only be motivated by an appeal to pre-existent normative commitments (by reference to a previously accepted ends).

It would be a mistake to think that this leads to the nihilistic conclusion that there are no reasons to prefer pursuing some particular putative ends over others, that everything is permitted. The perspectivist point is precisely that that concern only seems pressing from the perspective of someone who thinks that a genuinely rational choice between ends is only possible through the adoption of a completely neutral standpoint. *That* is the perspective that generates the nihilistic worry. The perspectivist thesis that there are no perspective-independent ends implies rather that the idea of complete neutrality, of a neutral standpoint from which prescriptive claims could be made, is incoherent. As incoherent as the idea of a perspectiveless perspective.

It would be equally mistaken to think that perspectivism leads to an uncritical provincialism or dogmatism: to be provincial or dogmatic is not to think from one's own vantage point, but to fail to take into account that one is always inevitably doing so. The idea that rational deliberation requires the adoption of a neutral standpoint is thus more likely to lead to dogmatism than perspectivism is. While it is impossible to adopt a non-perspectival perspective, it is not uncommon to model one's conception of neutrality on one's deepest and strongest convictions and commitments. Hence the need for critique, which as Foucault

notes, when properly understood, is always local and partial, always perspectival.⁶

5.1 Morality: Codes, Behavior, Self-Constitution

Let me begin by describing the basic elements of the framework. Morality is represented as consisting in three kinds of phenomena: moral codes, moral behavior and what Foucault sometimes refers to as ethics and as *rapport-à-soi*, and I shall also occasionally refer to as ethical self-constitution, or *self-constitution*. The first kind of phenomena, *moral codes*, are what we most commonly think of and discuss under the guise of “morality”: sets of prescriptions, “set[s] of values and rules of action that are proposed to individuals and to groups by means of diverse prescriptive apparatuses such as the family, educational institutions, churches, etc.”⁷ The second range of phenomena that constitute the domain of morality, *actual moral behaviors*, is the “actual behavior of individuals, in its relation to the rules and values that are proposed to them: the way in which they submit themselves more or less completely to a principle of conduct, in which they obey or resist an interdiction or a prescription, in which they respect or neglect a set of values.”⁸ But as I just noted, in addition to the moral codes and to the actual behavior of people, there is a third component of morality underscored by the framework, ethical *self-constitution*: “the way in which one ought ‘to conduct oneself’ ”;⁹ the way in which one ought to “constitute oneself as a moral subject that acts by reference to the prescriptive elements that constitute the moral code”; “the relationship that one ought to have to oneself, the *rapport à soi*, [...] which determines how the individual is supposed to constitute himself as moral subject of his own actions.”¹⁰

Now, Foucault explains the need to distinguish between these three types of phenomena,

6. Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”, p. 114.

7. Foucault, *L’usage des plaisirs*, p. 36.

8. Foucault, *L’usage des plaisirs*, p. 36.

9. Foucault, *L’usage des plaisirs*, p. 37.

10. Michel Foucault. “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress”. In: *The Foucault Reader*. Random House, 1984, pp. 340–373, p. 263.

and to include the third one, in the following way:

Une chose est en effet un règle de conduite; une autre chose la conduite qu'on peut mesurer à cette règle: Mais une autre chose encore, la manière dont on doit "se conduire,"— c'est-à-dire la manière dont on doit se constituer soi-même comme sujet moral agissant en référence aux éléments préscriptifs qui constituent le code.¹¹

With these resources in place, I want to draw attention to six important features of this framework. First, the framework is originally conceived as a methodological tool for the *history* of "the forms and transformations of a [given] 'morality,' "¹² as a tool for the study of *historically realized* forms and transformations of 'morality.' As a consequence, the framework is meant to be neutral in order to allow for the description of various particular, historically realized forms of morality.

The second, related point is that the framework is originally conceived as a tool for the study of the *forms* and *transformations* of historically realized 'moralities.' Thus, even though the framework is conceived as a tool for the study of historically realized forms of morality, it is in principle applicable also to possible forms of morality.

Third point: note that in Foucault's explanation for the need to include a third element in the framework, the three aspects of historically realized moralities are referred to as: norms of *conduct*; actual *conduct*; and ways in which individuals ought to *conduct* themselves ethically. The intersection between the three elements of the framework, three different axis for the study of the forms and transformations of historically realized 'moralities,' is thus the notion of *conduct*.

On the basis of these three features, we may begin to think of and refer to a 'morality' in the sense in which its history interests Foucault, as a historically realized "*form of moral conduct*." In this regard, the fact that Foucault employs the word "form" rather than "system"

11. Foucault, *L'usage des plaisirs*, p. 37.

12. Foucault, *L'usage des plaisirs*, p. 36.

is significant. It is a choice in light of the fact that since historically realized forms of moral conduct may lack the type of systematic unity that moral theories are commonly expected to have.

A fourth important feature of the framework is the inclusion of ethical self-constitution in the framework. Foucault glosses the third element of forms of moral conduct as ways in which one is called upon to conduct oneself, as ways in which one is called upon to constitute oneself as a moral subject in acting by reference to the code. Part of the idea is that within any given form of moral conduct, an individual's moral status, the type of moral subject that she is, is determined by the actions that she carries out *insofar as they are carried out by reference to* the prescriptive elements in the code. In other words, an individual's standing as a moral subject is not only determined by her actions, or by their relation to a given moral code. It is also determined by her answer to the questions: What is the ethically best way of living? What is the ethically best type of person, and what ought I do in order to become that type of person? Insofar as the moral status of an individual is determined by her attitude toward that question, a form of moral conduct comprises, in addition to moral codes and moral behavior, a conception of the type of answer that an individual is called upon to provide to this type of question.

It can be helpful, in this regard, to think of the necessity for this third element as corresponding in part to the need to be able to draw a distinction between acting in accordance with a norm, and acting in accordance with the norm for the sake of the norm.¹³ Acknowledging the validity of the distinction does not require that one commit to the view that only those actions carried out for the sake of the norm have genuinely moral worth, but it does imply that any normative claims about the moral worth of actions and the moral standing of agents are not only grounded in claims about what counts as a genuine moral norm and claims about whether a particular action satisfies the norm, but also in claims about the

13. The claim is not that the correspondence is deliberate, only that it is useful for heuristic purposes and an interesting point of entry for a further study of the difference between Kant and Foucault's conceptions of the moral life.

agent's relation to the norm when acting. Even the view that the moral worth of an action is not determined by the agent's motivations is grounded on a certain conception about the way in which an individual ought to conduct herself in order to constitute herself as a moral agent, a conception that takes into account the agent's relation to the relevant norms. Although Foucault's framework does not imply meta-ethical commitments, it is informed by the fact that meta-ethical commitments are always at work in ethical considerations, that an agent's perspective on what is ethical is constitutive of that agent's perspective on what is ethical and thus of the form of her ethical experience:

There is no particular moral action that does not refer to the unity of *a moral conduct* [i.e. a form of moral conduct], no moral conduct that does not call for *the constitution of oneself as a moral subject* [i.e. ethical self-constitution]¹⁴

This brings us to the fifth point about Foucault's conception of the form of moral conduct. Self-constitution is not defined as the way in which individuals *conduct themselves*, or ways in which individuals *constitute themselves* as ethical subjects. It is defined as the way in which individuals *are called upon* to conduct and *are called upon to* constitute themselves as moral subjects. This terminological choice is motivated by the fact, already noted, that the framework is originally intended for the study of historically realized forms of moral conduct, for the study of forms of moral conduct that have been at work in particular historical settings. Such forms of conduct *call for* individuals to become ethical subjects of a particular type. But trivially, that an individual is called upon to constitute herself as a particular type of ethical subject does not imply that she will accept this calling, even if it will inevitably inform her experience of ethical life. That the form of moral conduct dominant in a particular historical setting requires a certain mode of ethical self-constitution does not imply that that is the mode of ethical self-constitution adopted by every individual in that setting.

14. Il n'y a pas d'action morale particulière qui ne se réfère à l'unité d'une conduite morale, pas de conduite morale qui n'appelle la constitution de soi-même comme sujet moral [self-constitution]." (Foucault, *L'usage des plaisirs*, p. 40).

The sixth and final point that I want to make in connection with Foucault's framework is that it is consistent with the following fact: that an individual's conviction that her moral standing among the members of her community hinges on her conducting herself in compliance with a certain norm does not imply that she will indeed comply to the norm. However, insofar as that conviction will inform her conduct, the stance that she adopts towards the norm will be an ethical stance. As such, it will factor in the ethical status of her conduct. Even if, for instance, she decides to contest the legitimacy of the norm on independent moral grounds, her conviction that the norm is operative in her community will be at work in the way that she conducts herself morally.¹⁵ Her conviction that the norm was part of the dominant form of moral conduct within her community authorizes the view that a form of moral conduct partially characterized by that norm was operative within her historical setting.

Importantly, this last point does not hinge on the truth of her conviction. If her conviction was true, then the norm ought to be taken as part of the form of conduct that is dominant in that historical setting. If false, it may be taken to be part of her idiosyncratic form of moral conduct. This illustrates another important feature of the notion of forms of moral conduct. They may be instantiated in various ways, even within a single historical setting: as the dominant form of moral conduct; as a form of conduct advocated by the participants in moral-theoretical debates that take place within a self-contained institutional framework and which neither aim nor do in fact reflect or affect the form of moral conduct dominant in that setting; as the form of moral conduct adopted by the members of a minority group whose goal is to contest the dominant one; as the form of moral conduct adopted by a single individual that has actively set out to become a different type of ethical subject than the one

15. Note that the claim that the ethical status of her conduct is affected by her stance towards the ethical views that are dominant in her community does not rely on the conventionalist assumption that the ethical status of an action is determined by form of ethical conduct that is dominant in the community. The point is rather that regardless of the standard of assessment deployed in the moral assessment of her non-complying conduct, the fact her conduct is informed by an attitude towards what she takes to be commonly accepted as an ethical norm implies that that attitude is of relevance to its moral assessment.

that she is called upon to become by the dominant form of moral conduct.

*

Foucault developed this conceptual framework as a tool for the study of “forms and transformations” of forms of moral conduct that were dominant within particular historical settings. Yet insofar as the framework was designed in view to the description of *forms* of moral conduct, it is applicable to the study of possible forms of moral conduct *in general*. Furthermore insofar as it does not involve commitment to a particular form of ethical self-constitution, it is also neutral with respect to meta-ethical views. As such, it is a powerful methodological tool not only for Foucault’s particular purposes, but for ethical enquiry in general.

5.2 The Structure of Self-Constitution

In the book version of the *Preface to the Uses of Pleasure*, and in a famous interview, *On the Genealogy of Ethics*, after introducing the threefold framework for thinking about morality (i.e. moral codes, actual behaviors, form of relation-to-self or self-constitution), Foucault describes four different elements that define modes of subjectivation: ethical substance, mode of subjection, form of elaboration or practices of the self, and *telos*.

5.2.1 Ethical Substance

The ethical substance of an individual’s ethical relation to herself are the aspects of herself that she takes moral norms to bear upon. It is what answers the question: “Which is the aspect or the part of myself or my behavior which is concerned with moral conduct?” “It is the material that is going to be worked over by ethics.” Or as Arnold Davidson puts it, it is “the part of ourselves or our behavior which is taken to be the relevant domain of ethical

judgement.”¹⁶

Just as in any given historical setting there are specific foyers of experience, aspects of experience around which the form of experience is structured, there are particular ‘parts’ of individuals that serve as focal points of ethical consideration. Sexual and gender identity, for instance, were not part of ethical substance a few decades ago.

What is important in this notion is that it captures a dimension of morality that does not depend exclusively on kinds of actions, but may also depend on ‘parts of the self’ on other aspects of behavior that are involved in the accomplishment of those actions. What determines ethical substance is not the range of actions that are subject to moral standards, but “the way in which the individual [constitutes] this or that part of herself as the main matter of her moral conduct”¹⁷; the set of elements of the individual’s psychological or spiritual or physical make-up that are involved in a given type of action and on which the moral status of that kind of action depends.

Foucault illustrates this with the example of conjugal faithfulness. In context, the prescription to be faithful can take on considerably different meaning depending on whether it is taken to bear on its strict observance by the individual in her actions, on the individual’s mastery of her desires and on her ability to control them, or on even on the mere content of her thoughts and desires, regardless of her attitude towards them. There is indeed a substantive difference between judging that someone is ethically blameworthy only if he commits an infidelity, judging that the presence of a thought about or desire to be unfaithful is blameworthy on its own, and judging that the presence of such thoughts and desires are blameworthy only if the relevant agent does not attempt to suppress them.

16. Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress”, p. 228.

17. Foucault, *L’usage des plaisirs*, p. 36.

5.2.2 *Mode of Subjection*

The second feature of ethics is what Foucault calls the mode of subjection (*assoujetissement*). This is “*the way in which people are invited or incited to recognize their moral obligations,*”¹⁸ “*the way in which the individual establishes her relation to the rule and recognizes herself as bound by the obligation to put it to work.*”¹⁹ In contemporary terms, this corresponds to the answer of what Korsegaard has called: the normative question, the answer to the question: Why should I be moral? To return to Foucault’s example of conjugal fidelity: there is a variety of ways for an individual to recognize himself as bound by the precept of conjugal faithfulness: because he recognizes himself as the member of a community of people who accept it and live by it; because he regards himself as the heir of a spiritual tradition which he must preserve or revive; because he thinks that monogamy is natural and he ought to act in accordance with what is natural; because he is looking to give his personal life a certain form that answers to criteria of brilliance, beauty, nobility, perfection. We have already encountered an instance of modes of subjection in the contrast between two forms of subjectivity towards the end of the previous chapter. As we shall see, the idea of modes of subjection is central to Foucault’s ethical views, for one of the distinctive features of Foucault’s idea of an aesthetics of existence is that it involves a distinctive mode of subjection.

5.2.3 *Form of Elaboration or Ethical Practices*

The third aspect of ethics is the form elaboration, ethical practices, or ethical work: the set of practices whereby the individual renders herself able to comply with those norms, the kind of work and activity that an individual engages in in order to comply with rules of conduct and in order to turn herself into a certain kind of subject:

18. Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress”, p. 264.

19. Foucault, *L’usage des plaisirs*, p. 36.

What are we to do, either to moderate our acts, or to decide what we are, or to eradicate our desires, or to use our sexual desire in order to obtain certain aims such as having children, and so on – all this elaboration of ourselves in order to behave ethically? In order to be faithful to your spouse, you can work on yourself in a variety of ways.²⁰

As in the case of modes of subjection, the considerations at the end of the previous chapter also illustrate the notion of ethical practices. Acts of profession of faith and acts of confession are both practices that individuals partake in in order to turn themselves into the kinds of ethical subjects they aspire to become.

5.2.4 *Telos*

Finally, the *telos* of an ethics is the kind of person, the type of ethical subject that an individual aspires to become by acting in accordance with ethical norms. It is the end or goal of ethical subjectivation, insofar as the latter is a process of constitution of an individual as a type of moral subject. This seemingly obscure idea of a mode of being is a familiar one. It corresponds to what we generally think of under the guise of ‘kind of person,’ or ‘character’ of a person when we make statements like: “I am not that kind of person”; “that’s the kind of person that I strive to be”; the “kind of person with whom I can establish a meaningful friendship is...”; “she has such a great character.” Foucault’s idea is that compliance with moral precepts is always carried out against the background of an aim to be or become a certain kind of person, of modeling oneself after a certain kind of ethical ideal. An individual’s ethical relation to herself is always partially guided by a more or less conscious understanding of a kind of person that she would like to become:

Which is the kind of being to which we aspire to be when we behave in a moral way? For instance, shall we become pure, or immortal, or free, or masters of

20. Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress”, p. 265.

ourselves, and so on?²¹

A moral action tends towards its own accomplishment; but it also aims, through its own accomplishment, towards the constitution of a moral conduct that leads the individual not only towards actions that are in accord with values and rules, but also towards a certain mode of being characteristic of the moral subject.²²

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In the book version of the *Preface*, Foucault justifies the full version of the meta-ethical framework, including the fourfold structure of subjectivation, by pointing out that each of the elements of the framework is at work in every *particular* moral action *as such*:

Every moral action, it is true, involves a relation to the reality wherein it is accomplished [actual moral behavior] and a relation to the code to which it refers [moral codes]; but it also implies a certain relation to the self; this is not merely that of “self-consciousness,” but the constitution of oneself as “moral subject” [self-constitution], in which the individual circumscribes the part of herself that constitutes the object of the moral practice [ethical substance], defines his position in connection of the precept that she follows [mode of subjection], sets for herself a certain way of being that will count as self-realization [*telos*], and, in order to achieve this, acts on herself, engages in the project of coming to know herself, controls herself, tests herself, perfects and transforms herself [*form of elaboration or ethical practices*].²³

21. Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress”, p. 265.

22. Foucault, *L'usage des plaisirs*, p. 39.

23. “Toute action morale, c’est vrai, comporte un rapport au réel où elle s’effectue et un rapport au code auquel elle se réfère; mais elle implique aussi un certain rapport à soi; celui-ci n’est pas simplement “conscience de soi,” mais constitution de soi comme “sujet moral,” dans laquelle l’individu circonscrit la part de lui-même qui constitue cet objet de la pratique morale, définit sa position par rapport au précepte qu’il suit, se fixe un certain mode d’être qui vaudra comme accomplissement de lui-même, et, pour ce faire, agit

If the framework is apt to facilitate ethical enquiry in general, and the study of historically dominant forms of moral conduct in particular, it is because it takes into account the various elements that determine the form of moral conduct. Actions are moral relative to the moral code at work in their historical setting. But an equally important thought often neglected in the study of moral conduct is that the morality at work in any such particular setting also involves a call upon individuals to constitute themselves as moral subjects, a call for their active ethical subjectivation or self-constitution. Insofar as such self-constitution is active, it is defined by a goal: type of person that relevant agent ought to aspire to become, the type of person that she is to regard as morally praiseworthy; by the aspects of herself that are the subject matter of ethical concern; by the type of relation relation that she ought to establish between herself and norms; and by the type of actions that she ought to undertake in order to attain the ethical ideal defined by the three previous elements:

There is no particular moral action that does not refer to the unity of *a moral conduct* [i.e. a form of moral conduct], no moral conduct that does not call for *the constitution of oneself as a moral subject* [i.e. ethical self-constitution], and no constitution of the moral subject without modes of subjectivation and without an “ascetics” or “practices of the self” that support it.²⁴

5.3 Passive, Active and Free Self-Constitution

We can bring the importance of this point into view is by considering in more detail a remark that I made in passing toward the end of the previous chapter, concerning the ambiguity of the term “self-constitution.”²⁵ What I said in passing was that it is possible to think of

sur lui-même, entreprend de ce connaître, se contrôle, s'éprouve, se perfectionne, se transforme” (Foucault, *L'usage des plaisirs*, p. 40).

24. Il n'y a pas d'action morale particulière qui ne se réfère à l'unité d'une conduite morale, pas de conduite morale qui n'appelle la constitution de soi-même comme sujet moral [self-constitution]; et pas de constitution du sujet moral sans des “modes de subjectivation” et sans une “ascétique” ou des “pratiques de soi” qui les appuient” (Foucault, *L'usage des plaisirs*, p. 40).

25. See p. 151 above.

subjectivation as a process of self-constitution, so long as we give more weight to the passive sense of the phrase. For the process whereby an individual becomes a certain type of subject can be more or less passive.

It would be maximally passive in the case of the completely un-reflexive or uncritical individual, the individual that goes through life passively and un-reflexively adopting the modes of subjectivation characteristic of the dominant form of moral conduct of his time, the individual that exhibits what Nietzsche refers to as the herd-mentality. It needn't be the case that this person never has to face a moral dilemma, and to that extent has never been forced to engage in serious moral deliberation. He may well have done so, even constantly done so. What is characteristic of the passive agent is that in deliberating, he passively deploys the deliberative procedures that have been inculcated in him in the course of his life through his participation in the various practices that make up the social fabric within his historical setting.

It would be less passive in the case of a more reflexive individual who adopts a critical stance toward an attitude, a practice, a mode of behavior that she is pressured to follow or that is widespread in her community and which she is called upon to partake in. Think about any act of resistance, any act whereby an individual constitutes herself as the kind of moral object that is unwilling to tolerate an immoral practice, even at the cost of putting herself at risk.

An even more active way of constituting oneself as a moral subject can be illustrated by reference to Martin Luther King's idea that the success of the civil rights movement required not only resistance and opposition to discriminatory practices, but also that the members of the movement did not exhibit the type of behavior that they were expected to exhibit by the racist population.²⁶ This idea is predicated on the insight that there is more than one way to conduct oneself as the type of subject that is unwilling to accept morally abhorrent

26. See, for instance, chapter VII of (Martin Luther King and C. Carson. *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*. King Legacy. Beacon Press, 2010).

practices, and that some such ways of constituting oneself as a moral subject may contribute to the reinforcement and perpetuation of the practices that one finds abhorrent rather than to their elimination. The contrast between characterizing modes of subjectivation as ways in which individuals constitute themselves as subjects and ways in which individuals ought to constitute themselves as subject is the contrast between ways in which, dominant modes of self-constitution at a time and the modes of self-constitution that individuals actually engage in.

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To sum up, on Foucault's conception of forms of moral conduct, there is no ethical conduct, properly speaking, that does not involve ethical *self*-constitution. But ethical self-constitution can be more or less passive: selves do not constitute themselves *ex-nihilo* through a voluntaristic act. Individuals are passively constituted into subjects through their participation in practices that make up the social fabric that is in place in their particular historical setting. But what exactly does the idea of a variable degree of passivity involve? In the previous paragraph, I suggested that this is the idea of the degree to which each particular individual is reflexive and adopts a critical stance towards the moral trends in her community. It is the degree to which an agent *actively* undertakes the project of constituting herself as a moral subject. But if selves do not constitute themselves *ex nihilo*, how can they actively constitute themselves at all? What are the processes whereby they come to be constituted, and in what sense can one said be an active agent in such processes? Let's consider each of these questions in turn.

5.3.1 Passive and Active Self-Constitution

As you may recall,²⁷ in the context of the discussion of Lacan in the 1978 interview, Foucault says that one of Lacan's main contributions was the insight that subjects are constituted by

27. See 4.3.1, p. 134 above.

complex processes and procedures that “are not within the order of subjectivity,” an order that “is evidently very difficult to name and bring into view, but more fundamental and more originary than the subject itself.”²⁸ The close study of processes of subjectivation that Foucault undertook in the late 1970s and 80s enabled him, however, to acquire a clearer conception of these processes, of the non-subjective register to which these processes belong. As we shall see, part of what it means to say that a process whereby a self is constituted belongs to a non-subjective order is to say that it is a process that is not subject to the relevant subject’s rational endorsement. Selves are constituted by non-subjective phenomena, self-constitution is by default a passive phenomena.

But this can seem to generate a problem:

Peut-être notre problème est-il maintenant de découvrir que le soi n’est rien d’autre que le corrélatif historique de la technologie construite au cours de notre histoire.²⁹

If self-constitution is always purely passive, there seems to be no room for genuinely free action. That is: if, on the one hand, what a subject does depends on the type of subject that she is, but if, on the other hand, the type of subject that she is is determined by processes that belong to an order over which she has no influence, then she can at best be regarded as the hopelessly passive observer of the unfolding of the life of the subject that she has turned ‘out into’ in the particular circumstances that have led to her becoming that subject. She sees herself react, and may even see herself change over the course of her life in light of various experiences. But since, *ex hypothesi*, how she reacts is determined by further processes that ‘do not belong to the subjective order’ and which it is therefore not up to her to avoid, she can only claim ownership of her actions in the weakest of senses.

28. Foucault, “Tetsugaku no butai. La scène de la philosophie. Entretien avec M. Watanabe, 22 avril, 1978, Sekai, juillet, 1978”, p. 590.

29. Foucault, *L’origine de l’herméneutique de soi: conférences prononcées à Dartmouth College, 1980*, p. 90.

As we shall see, however, Foucault's enquiry into subjectivity in the late 1970s and early 1980s lead him to abandon the view that subjects are *only* the result of processes that belong to a non-subjective register, that they are nothing but the historical correlate of a technology.

Passive Self-Constitution: Thought as the Form of Action

Let's begin by considering the processes which do not belong to the register of subjectivity but of which the subject is the result, or what amounts to the same, let's consider the question: how does passive self-constitution take place?

The answer is provided in the *Draft of the Preface to the Second Volume of the History of Sexuality* and in *The Government of Self and Others*, in Foucault's discussion of the interrelated notions of *thought* and of a *form or foyer of experience* that he developed around 1982.

As we saw,³⁰ Foucault defines a form of experience as consisting of three interrelated elements. In the *Draft*³¹: domains of knowledge, rules or matrices of behavior, and *modes of relation to oneself*. In the *Lecture*³²: forms of possible knowledge, normative matrices of behavior, virtual modes of existence for possible subjects. Since, as we saw in Chapter 4, Foucault defines subjectivation both as processes that result in the constitution of a subject, and as the formation of a determined relation to oneself,³³ we can simply refer to the last element as modes of subjectivation. So we can understand forms of experience as the intersection of domains of knowledge, matrices of behavior, and modes of subjectivation.

Finally, we've also seen that Foucault used the notion of a form of experience in order to characterize a technical sense of "thought":

Par "pensée," j'entends ce qui instaure, dans diverses formes possibles, le jeu du

30. See 3.4.2, p. 103 above.

31. Foucault, "Préface à l'Histoire de la sexualité", p. 1398.

32. Foucault, *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres: cours au Collège de France (1982-1983)*, p. 32.

33. Foucault, *Du gouvernement des vivants: cours au Collège de France 1979-1980*, p. 227.

vrai et du faux et qui, par conséquent, constitue l'être humain comme sujet de connaissance; ce qui fonde l'acceptation où le refus de la règle et constitue l'être humain comme sujet social et juridique; ce qui instaure le rapport avec soi-même et avec les autres, et constitue l'être humain comme sujet éthique.³⁴

In the *Draft*, Foucault further explains:

“Thought,” understood in this way, is not, then, to be sought only in theoretical formulations such as those of philosophy or science; it can and must be analyzed in every manner of speaking, doing or behaving in which the individual appears as subject of learning, as an ethical or juridical subject, as a subject conscious of himself and others. In this sense, thought is understood as the very form of action—as action insofar as it implies the play of true and false, the acceptance or refusal of rules, the relation to oneself and others. The study of forms of experience can thus proceed from an analysis of “practices”—discursive or not—as long as one qualifies that word to mean the different systems of action *insofar as* they are inhabited by thought as I have characterized it here.³⁵

In brief, thought, in Foucault’s technical sense, is what constitutes the individual as a subject of knowledge in her relation to truth, as a social and political subject in her relation to others, as an ethical subject in her relation to herself. But that is to say: what determines the type of subject that an individual becomes are the domains of possible knowledge, the matrices of possible behavior, and the modes of subjectivation that characterize the form of experience characteristic of her historical context. These, in turn, are determined by the various historical processes that have resulted in the regularization of the dominant practices of her culture.³⁶

34. Foucault, “Préface à l’Histoire de la sexualité”, p. 1398.

35. Foucault, “Preface to The History of Sexuality, Volume II”, p. 334-335.

36. Note in passing that Foucault has here the rudiments of a theory of agency: rational belief / rational action / rational subject mental agency / practical agency / agency knowledge / power / subject.

On Foucault's mature view, the processes that lead to the constitution of an individual into a type of subject are the historical processes that lead to the emergence of the practices that lend form to the collective form of experience at work in her historical setting, and to the particular form of experience of that individual, *ipso facto* defining the space of her possible theoretical, social or political, and ethical actions.

This provides the resources to understand Foucault's 1978 claim to the effect that processes of subjectivation do not belong to a subjective order. On Foucault's view, subjects are constituted through their participation in practices. But an individual's participation in a practice is not always the result of a free, rational deliberative procedure that issues in the choice to participate in it. Participation in linguistic practices in one's native language, for instance, is not the result of such a choice. Yet it substantively shapes the form of an individual's subjectivity.³⁷ A practice of subjectivation can be said not to belong to the subjective order to the extent that the individual's participation in that practice does not issue from a free, deliberate, rational choice.³⁸

5.3.2 *The Problem of Passivity*

It is at this stage that we encounter the aforementioned worry that on Foucault's conception of self-constitution, there is no room for the idea of free self-constitution. Any actual process of subjectivation, any instance of a process that results in the constitution of a subject involves the relevant individual's participation in a set of practices. Thus it would seem that the least passive type of self-constitution would be one that results from the individual's reflexive and critical decision to partake in that practice, in full-knowledge of its subjectivating effects. The self-constituting individual is aware of the subjectivation effects of her participation in the practice, and her decision to participate in the practice is informed by

37. The role of language in the constitution of subjectivity is of course one of Foucault's main reasons for attributing Lacan the idea that the subject is constituted by non-subjective processes.

38. In a minimal sense of rational in which to be rational is to act *for* a reason, as oppose to a stronger sense in which to be rational is to act for the *best* reason available to oneself.

a critical examination of the latter. The source of the problem is that since critical examination is informed by *thought*, and an individual's *thought* at any given time is determined by the practices into which she has partaken up to that point, even the most active type of self-constitution remains largely passive. In short: since a critical stance is always the stance of an already (and largely passively) constituted subject, even the most active types of subjectivation are largely passive. There is no genuinely active subjectivation.

The problem with this worry is that it is predicated on the assumption that in order for self-constitution to be active, the individual must be able to constitute herself *ex nihilo*. It is based on the assumption that a process of subjectivation is only free if it issues from a free and rational deliberative process, along with the supplementary assumption that a deliberative process is free and rational only if its grounds are selected through an equally free and rational deliberative process. If this were right, then in order to engage in active subjectivation, an individual would have to be able to think and act independently of the type of subject that she is, altogether strip herself from any form of subjectivity. On this view, subjectivation would be active only if it were carried out *ex nihilo*.

From a Foucauldian perspective, the idea that in order to be active, an individual's practice of self-constitution must both result from the adoption of a critical stance toward the practice, and be *ex nihilo* (i.e. not be informed by the subject's *thought*) is incoherent. The incoherence hinges on the idea that it is possible to adopt a critical *stance* towards the potential self-constituting practice without relying on the individual's *thought* at the time. It is this idea of a maximally neutral perspective, of a perspective that is contentless, normless, and subjectless, of a purely rational or purely objective perspective, but which can at the same time be a source of normative standards that guide a deliberative process, that is incoherent. Rationality is always embedded in *thought*; the exercise of reason is always situated, always perspectival.

Borrowing a claim made by Sellars about the rationality of science, we can put Foucault's view about the embedded character of rationality and of the rationality of self-constitution in

this way: self-constitution is not rational or free because it has a purely rational foundation or because it is carried entirely free from non-subjective processes. It is free because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put any claim, any practice and more generally any aspect of subjectivity in jeopardy at any given moment, though not all at once. The freedom and rationality of active self-constitution do not require that the latter be based on pure reason, for reason, once again, is always embedded, always historical, it is always informed by *thought*.

5.4 Critique, Reason and the Idea of Freedom as a Practical Achievement

The preceding considerations reproduce a certain cleavage between two different conceptions and two competing attitudes that one may adopt towards the idea of rational critique. According to the first conception, a critical stance is a stance that is neutral with respect to the subject's perspective. In adopting the critical stance, a subject reasons *qua* rational agent, where this is understood as an agent that reasons independently of the particularities of her situation, her personal history, her worldview, and so forth. On this conception, there are pure standards of rationality, pure in the twofold sense that their validity as standards of rationality is not contingent upon any particularities of the agent's situation and in the sense that their application does not rely on any non purely rational foundation. On this conception, the critical stance is a pure, rational stance in the sense that it is not constrained by or reliant upon the relevant agent's particular, local, and thus limited perspective. Call this, the purist or robust conception of rationality, robust in that it involves a conception of rationality as normatively loaded.

According to the second conception, a critical stance is a stance that is only neutral in relation to a limited or restricted set of claims or attitudes that are under critical scrutiny. In adopting a critical stance, an individual subjects a restricted set of claims to critical scrutiny

by holding them to standards of rationality. But standards of rationality are perspectival in a twofold sense: their validity as standards of rationality is relative to the perspective of the relevant agent, it is relative to that agent's *thought*, and it is perspectival also in the sense that granted the validity of a standard of rationality within a given agent's *thought*, applications of that standard to the claims and attitudes that are under critical scrutiny will also rely on elements of the relevant agent's perspective or *thought*. On this conception, the critical stance is not and cannot be purely rational because an exercise of reason can never be pure. Reason is inherently perspectival. Call this, the perspectivist or minimalist conception of rationality, minimalist in that it is a conception of rationality that does not build substantive normative principles into the concept of rationality, but takes the individual's particular perspective to be the 'source' of normative commitments.

These two conceptions of rationality do not only issue in two different conceptions of what it is to adopt a critical stance. They also inform two distinct conceptions of freedom. These two conceptions of freedom coincide in the idea that freedom is best understood as rational self-determination. That freedom consists in self-determination, determination of the self by the self independently of 'external' constraint is uncontroversial. That it is *rational* self-determination follows from a minimal conception of rationality as the capacity to act *for* reasons. Rational self-determination is determination independently of 'external' constraints insofar as it is determination of an individual by herself on the basis of what she regards as *her* reasons.

There is a further point on which the robust and minimalist conceptions of rationality coincide, namely, that the purpose of adopting a critical standpoint when deliberating is to maximize freedom. If freedom is rational self-determination, determination independently of external constraints, and if an individual's perspective is largely determined by external constraints, external in that they have not been the result of an already rational choice on the part of the individual, then the exercise of freedom requires the availability of a procedure for neutralizing the influence of the external constraints that inform the individual's perspective.

Intuitively, the two views of rationality and freedom coincide in the idea that freedom requires the ability to move away from one's individual perspective insofar as it is informed by external constraints.

In spite of this points of overlap, the differences in the conceptions of reason that characterize the robust and the minimalist positions, and the ensuing difference in the respective conceptions of what it is to adopt a critical stance, result in substantive differences in their respective conceptions of *rational* self-determination.

In order to bring out these differences, it will be useful to bear in mind the distinction between freedom or self-determination as a capacity, and freedom of self-determination as a condition. On the robust conception, the *capacity* of rational self-determination is exercised through the adoption of a purely rational standpoint. The adoption of such a standpoint amounts to the achievement of a *condition* of freedom from external constraint insofar as it abstracts from all the elements in an individual's perspective that cannot be established on purely rational grounds, thus depriving from constraining force anything that the individual may have been circumstantially, accidentally, and non-rationally led to accept. On the perspectivist or minimalist conception, the capacity for rational self-determination is the capacity to the adopt a critical stance toward some local elements of one's individual perspective on the basis of other elements. But since the critical stance is partially informed by elements of one's perspective that may have been passively accepted, the adoption of a critical stance towards some of the elements in one's perspective does not guarantee the attainment of a condition of freedom for external constraint. The attainment of the condition of freedom comes in degrees, slowly, through the patient and sustained work of critique over oneself and one's commitments. The attainment of *any* substantive degree of freedom from external constraint requires that the critical stance be adopted systematically and consistently over an extended period of time, it requires the systematic pursuit of independence from external constraints.

On both accounts, the capacity to adopt a critical stance can be exercised by an individual

at any given moment. The purist identifies the adoption of a critical stance with the adoption of a stance that is entirely free from external constraints insofar as it is free from any traces of individuality. The movement from the individual perspective to the purely rational perspective can be accomplished in one step, and the type of self-determination at which it aims amounts to the domestication of the individual by the aspects of her self that are void of individuality. Rationality, being robust, imposes limitations on the space of possible thought and action. To act rationally is to ensure that one remains within those boundaries. To adopt a critical stance is to efface the traces of one's individuality in order to draw the boundaries within which it is to remain confined, on pains of irrationality.

The perspectivist identifies the adoption of a critical stance with the adoption of a stance that is merely partially free from external constraints. So the movement from the individual perspective to the rational perspective is not one of abstraction, or as Hadot sometime suggests, of rational ascent. It is a movement of piecemeal but systematic scrutiny. As before: freedom is the capacity to engage in a self-correcting enterprise which can put any claim, any practice, any norm, and more generally any aspect of subjectivity in jeopardy at any given moment, though not all at once, and which, when pursued over the course of a lifetime, can issue in the conquest of a freely constituted form of subjectivity. For the purist, the condition of freedom is not the momentary and immediate effect of the actualization of a capacity that can be exercised at will, it is the lifelong achievement of an active effort of self-constitution.

5.4.1 The relation between the purist and the perspectivist's conceptions of reason

In section 5.3.1, I argued that Foucault's conception of self-constitution allows for the possibility of active self-constitution: Foucault's conception of the form moral conduct does not exclude the possibility of freedom. Toward the end of that section, I introduced a potential worry to the effect that even if Foucault's view does not exclude freedom, it imposes a

conception of freedom that is too narrow to be acceptable. Thus, the worry goes, in order to adequately capture the sense in which we are free, it is necessary to reject Foucault's framework.

The distinction introduced in the previous section between a robust and a minimalist conception of freedom is partially meant to show that the sense in which Foucault's conception of freedom is 'narrow' is not obviously problematic. It is true that on the perspectivist conception, the central concept of freedom is as an achievement rather than as an originary capacity, but this is only a restatement of the point that *thought* is the form of action, an acknowledgement of the trivial but crucially important fact that human agents always act from a situated perspective, a perspective that is largely informed by the agent's experience and circumstances, or rather a perspective that is independent of the agent's particular circumstances to the extent that she has undertaken and actively pursued the project of freeing herself from external constraints.

The distinction also provides the resources to begin to situate Foucault's perspectivism with respect to a common conception of reason and subjectivity that may lead to an alternative conception of freedom. The purist conception involves a commitment to the claim that every rational agent (every agent endowed with rational capacities) ought to act rationally (in the particular purist's sense of "rationally"). The perspectivist view involves no normative commitments of the sort. Even the conception of freedom sketched above is neutral. It does not involve the claim that humans ought to pursue their freedom. It only involves the claim that achieving a state of freedom is only possible through its active pursuit.

On this perspectivist conception, the ethical status of an individual does not depend solely on their actions, nor on their relation of their actions to a particular moral code that is used as a standard of assessment, it depends on the individual's active undertaking of the constitution of herself as an ethical subject. In Foucault's words:

Freedom is the ontological condition of ethics. But ethics is the considered form

that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection.³⁹

39. Michel Foucault. "The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom: An Interview with Michel Foucault on January 20, 1984". In: *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. Vol. 1. The New Press, 1997, pp. 281–302, p. 284.

CHAPTER 6

BEYOND TRADITION: MACINTYRE OR FOUCAULT?

In the previous chapter, we had a first approximation to Foucault's conception of the form of ethical experience. We also saw that on Foucault's view, individuals are constituted into ethical subjects through their participation on the practices that are at work in their particular historical setting, and we examined the views of freedom and rationality that are at work in these conceptions of ethical experience and of ethical subjectivation. In this chapter, I shall consider MacIntyre's objection to the kind of perspectivism advocated by Foucault. For interestingly, although there are several points of overlap in MacIntyre's and Foucault's approaches to ethics, and in particular, to their analysis of contemporary ethical discourse, they ultimately adopt opposing stances, in *After Virtue* and in *Three Rival's Version of Moral Enquiry*, MacIntyre launches a battery of arguments against perspectivist views à la Nietzsche and Foucault.

6.1 MacIntyre's Characterization of the Current State of Moral Discourse

MacIntyre begins *After Virtue* with a piece of historical fiction. Since this sets the stage for much of his argument, I give myself license to quote extensively rather than paraphrase:

Imagine that the natural sciences were to suffer the effects of a catastrophe. A series of environmental disasters are blamed by the general public on the scientists. Widespread riots occur, laboratories are burnt down, physicists are lynched, books and instruments are destroyed. Finally a Know-Nothing political movement takes power and successfully abolishes science teaching in schools and universities, imprisoning and executing the remaining scientists. Later still there is a reaction against this destructive movement and enlightened people seek to revive science, although they have largely forgotten what it was. But all that they possess are fragments: a knowledge of experiments detached from any knowledge of the theoretical context which gave them significance; pans of theories unrelated

either to the other bits and pieces of theory which they possess or to experiment; instruments whose use has been forgotten; half-chapters from books, single pages from articles, not always fully legible because torn and charred. Nonetheless all these fragments are reembodyed in a set of practices which go under the revived names of physics, chemistry and biology. Adults argue with each other about the respective merits of relativity theory, evolutionary theory and phlogiston theory, although they possess only a very partial knowledge of each. Children learn by heart the surviving portions of the periodic table and recite as incantations some of the theorems of Euclid. Nobody, or almost nobody, realizes that what they are doing is not natural science in any proper sense at all. For everything that they do and say conforms to certain canons of consistency and coherence and those contexts which would be needed to make sense of what they are doing have been lost, perhaps irretrievably.

In such a culture men would use expressions such as ‘neutrino,’ ‘mass,’ ‘specific gravity,’ ‘atomic weight’ in systematic and often interrelated ways which would resemble in lesser or greater degrees the ways in which such expressions had been used in earlier times before scientific knowledge had been so largely lost. But many of the beliefs presupposed by the use of these expressions would have been lost and there would appear to be an element of arbitrariness and even of choice in their application which would appear very surprising to us. What would appear to be rival and competing premises for which no further argument could be given would abound. Subjectivist theories of science would appear and would be criticized by those who held that the notion of truth embodied in what they took to be science was incompatible with subjectivism.¹

As I mentioned, this story is meant to set the stage for his overall argument. It is a heuristic device designed to render intuitive to his audience his by-his-own-lights controversial

1. Alasdair C. MacIntyre. *After Virtue*. Third. University of Notre Dame Press, 2007, pp. 1-2.

understanding of current moral discourse. Such an understanding he sums up as follows:

The hypothesis which I wish to advance is that in the actual world which we inhabit the language of morality is in the same state of grave disorder as the language of natural science in the imaginary world which I described. What we possess, if this view is true, are the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived. We possess indeed simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have — very largely, if not entirely — lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, or morality.²

Throughout the first half of the book, MacIntyre makes a plausible case for this hypothesis. The first step is to point out two striking features of “contemporary moral utterance” that do seem to corroborate the hypothesis: that (1) it is largely used to *express disagreement* in the context of (2) seemingly *endless debates*.³

These striking features can be explained in terms of three other characteristics of contemporary moral debates: (i) the conceptual incommensurability of the rival arguments deployed by those on either side of each debate; (ii) the purported impersonality of those arguments; and (iii) the assumption that the history of moral discourse is to be found “*in the writings of philosophers and theorists instead of in those intricate bodies of theory and practice which constitute human cultures, the beliefs of which are articulated by philosophers and theorists only in a partial and selective manner*”.⁴

How is the fact that contemporary moral discourse is mostly used to express disagreement in endless debates explained by these facts? The *conceptual incommensurability* of the arguments in moral debates explains their endless character: it implies that there is “*no rational way of measuring the premises of one [argument] as against the other,*” since “*each*

2. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 2.

3. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 6.

4. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 10.

premise employs some quite different normative or evaluative concept from the others, so that the claims made upon us are of quite different kinds."⁵ As a result, for the observer or participant that is unaware of such conceptual incommensurability, moral debate takes the form of an irrational clash of wills, where each party forcefully asserts a position that ultimately rests on voluntaristic choice.

The *impersonality* of the arguments deployed in moral debates consists in the fact that the force of those arguments is meant to be independent of the person deploying them. In the face of Eutyphro's problem of whether the good is good because 'we' regard it as good, or whether 'we' regard it as good because it is good, we all adopt the latter stance. When we engage in moral debates, we do not try to persuade our interlocutors to adopt our stance because it is ours, but aim at persuading them that it is our stance because it is the right stance to adopt, and since it is the right stance to adopt they too should adopt it.

And note that already here already begins to emerge a tension within contemporary moral debates. For the incommensurability of arguments implies that they are conceptual-framework-dependent, but their purported impersonality implies that they're deployed as though they were framework-independent. This has the following implication. If, on the one hand, the participants in a given moral debate are unaware of the incommensurability of their respective arguments, the debate in question is pointless: its participants think of themselves as presenting reasons for endorsing their view which any rational agent ought to endorse, but they are in fact presenting claims that are only recognizable as reasons by agents that share their conceptual framework, claims, consequently, that their interlocutors could not recognize as reasons. If, alternatively, the participants in a moral debate are aware of such incommensurability, then unless they have a rational procedure for choosing among their incommensurable views, they must understand their adherence to their respective frameworks as voluntaristic rather than rationally grounded. But that their frameworks are incommensurable rather than merely incompatible implies that there is no common ra-

5. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 8.

tional standard against which the two frameworks could be measured. So the availability of such a rational decision procedure is ruled out, their adherence to their frameworks must be recognized as voluntaristic. Thus, whether or not the participants of a moral debate recognize the incommensurability of their conceptual frameworks, it is not possible for the debate to issue in *rational* agreement about the debated issue; the debates have rather the form of irrational idle talk, of an exchange of expressions of attitudes rather than a dialogue concerning moral facts.

Finally, the third characteristic of contemporary debate, according to MacIntyre, was *the assumption that the history of moral discourse is limited to the history of moral philosophy and theory*. This assumption helps explain how contemporary moral discourse takes the form of endless debate that at best serves to express disagreement by reinforcing our generalized blindness to the incommensurability of moral arguments: the history of moral discourse can then appear to be the history of dialectical progress within a single conceptual framework towards the current state of affairs. From this perspective, if that state of affairs is one in which moral debate seems unable to issue in rational agreement, the conclusion to draw is not that the parties of such debates are talking past each other or lack an appropriate understanding of the topic of their debate, it is rather that contrary to what we had assumed up until now, the function of moral discourse is not to state moral facts, for there are none: moral discourse serves instead to *express* the speakers attitudes towards certain types of states of affairs.

To sum up, according to MacIntyre, contemporary moral discourse has taken the form of endless debate that can at least be expressive of different attitudes towards morality because based on the assumption that the history of moral debate is the history of philosophical and theoretical debate about morality, the various participants in that debate assume that they are all operating within a single conceptual framework, and therefore that it is possible for them to defend their different views from a purely impersonal standpoint in order to reach consensus. But unbeknownst to them, they are operating from incommensurable

conceptual frameworks, so they lack the resources for making a rational choice between different possible frameworks, and the lucidity to realize this. Their statements are thus best seen as expressions of their non-rational commitment to stand by their native frameworks; debates among them are bound to be endless.

The next step in MacIntyre's argument is to provide a historical reconstruction of how moral discourse came to be in this state. He traces the source of the problem to the phenomenon that I drew attention to in the introduction to the dissertation: (i) a shift in our conception of nature and of human beings, a shift whose end-point was incompatible with (ii) traditional ways of thinking about the force of moral injunctions. He refers to the traditional way of thinking about ethics as a threefold teleological scheme:

We thus have [throughout classical Greece and the Middle ages up to the Enlightenment] a threefold scheme in which [1] human-nature-as-it-happens-to-be (human nature in its untutored state) is initially discrepant and discordant with the precepts of ethics and [2] needs to be transformed by the instruction of practical reason and experience into [3] human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realized-its *telos*.⁶

Within such a schema, the claims of ethics are claims about what an individual has to do in order to realize her 'essential' or 'true' nature:

Within that teleological scheme there is a fundamental contrast between man-as-he-happens-to-be and man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-essential-nature. Ethics is the science which is to enable men to understand how they make the transition from the former state to the latter.⁷

The shift whose end-point was, according to MacIntyre, incompatible with that traditional way of thinking about ethics, and the way in which it brought moral discourse to its

6. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 53.

7. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 53.

contemporary fragmented state, is described as follows:

[T]he joint effect of the secular rejection of both Protestant and Catholic theology and the scientific and philosophical rejection of Aristotelianism was to eliminate any notion of man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-*telos*. Since the whole point of ethics — both as a theoretical and a practical discipline — is to enable man to pass from his present state to his true end, the elimination of any notion of essential human nature and with it the abandonment of any notion of a *telos* leaves behind a moral scheme composed of two remaining elements whose relationship becomes quite unclear. There is on the one hand a certain content for morality: a set of injunctions deprived of their teleological context. There is on the other hand a certain view of untutored-human-nature-as-it-is. Since the moral injunctions were originally at home in a scheme in which their purpose was to correct, improve and educate that human nature, they are clearly not going to be such as could be deduced from true statements about human nature or justified in some other way by appealing to its characteristics. The injunctions of morality, thus understood, are likely to be ones that human nature, thus understood, has strong tendencies to disobey. Hence the eighteenth-century moral philosophers engaged in what was an inevitably unsuccessful project; for they did indeed attempt *to find a rational basis for their moral beliefs in a particular understanding of human nature*,⁸ while inheriting a set of moral injunctions on the one hand and a conception of human nature on the other which had been expressly designed to be discrepant with each other. This discrepancy was not removed by their revised beliefs about human nature. They inherited incoherent fragments of a once coherent scheme of thought and action and, since they did not recognize their own peculiar historical and cultural situation, they could not

8. My emphasis.

recognize the impossible and quixotic character of their self-appointed task.⁹

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We're now in a position to see the methodological benefit of considering MacIntyre's *After Virtue*. First, MacIntyre's conception of the current problematic state of moral thought corresponds exactly with the scheme described in the introduction. But that MacIntyre's approach to ethics is framed in terms of this scheme, the same scheme which it is one of Foucault's main goals to abandon, makes MacIntyre's work an ideal point of reference for situating Foucault's thought within contemporary ethics. Second, and this is of course no accident, in developing his argument in this and other works, and in presenting his solution to the contemporary moral predicament, MacIntyre himself uses that scheme to situate his view in relation Kant's, Nietzsche's, and Sartre's, three of the authors that most influenced Foucault's work. Thus MacIntyre's work affords an ideal entry point for situating Foucault's views within the contemporary landscape not only through the central conceptual themes that structure his approach to ethics, but also through the references in the philosophical tradition that were central to his intellectual development and lent form to his overall intellectual project. Finally, in after *After Virtue*, MacIntyre presents what I have been referring as the modern predicament as forcing upon us a choice between Nietzschean and Aristotelian approaches to ethics,¹⁰ and defends the Aristotelian option. And while *After Virtue* does not contain any explicit references to Foucault's work, in one of its sequels, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy and Tradition*, MacIntyre writes that no attempt to carry out Nietzsche's program "*in terms of systematic implementation or erudition or honesty is likely to be more impressive than that to which Michel Foucault devoted so much of his life*".¹¹ This authorizes rethinking the choice with which MacIntyre confronts

9. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 54-55.

10. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Chapters 9 and 18.

11. Alasdair C. MacIntyre. *Three rival versions of moral enquiry : encyclopedia, genealogy, and tradition : being Gifford lectures delivered in the University of Edinburgh in 1988*. University of Notre Dame Press, 1990, p. 47.

us as a choice between his own Aristotelian view and what he himself regards as the most sophisticated version of a Nietzschean approach to morality: Foucault's ethical thought. Carrying out this task will enable us to place Foucault's own ethical thought in relation to MacIntyre, and to bring into view, from a different perspective than in previous parts of the dissertation, the distinctiveness of Foucault's approach to ethics relative to more traditional and traditionalist approaches.

In the remainder of this chapter I will consider MacIntyre's direct and indirect arguments against Foucault's ethical views. The direct argument, which will be the topic of the next section, is an argument for the impossibility of carrying out a genealogical project. The indirect argument, the topic of the following section, consists in a defense of an Aristotelian over a Nietzschean approach to ethics.

6.2 MacIntyre's Argument Against Genealogy

In *Three Rival's Version of Moral Enquiry*, MacIntyre defends a tradition-based over a genealogical approach to morality. The argument against the genealogical method is presented as an objection to Foucault's application of that method for the reason mentioned a few paragraphs above: MacIntyre takes Foucault's particular implementation of that method to be the most systematic, erudite and intellectually honest version of it. In this section, I will argue that MacIntyre's criticism is based on a misunderstanding of Foucault's conception of the genealogical method.

In order to defend the tradition-based over the genealogical approach to moral enquiry, MacIntyre's strategy is to argue that there are constraints on the notion of personal identity that cannot be fulfilled by the genealogist but that can be fulfilled by the traditionalist. If MacIntyre is right, it is not possible to carry out the genealogical program without adopting a standpoint that is excluded by some of the presuppositions of that program. If MacIntyre is right, any attempt to execute the genealogical program is performatively self-defeating.

In what follows, I will present what MacIntyre identifies as conditions on personal identity,

as well as what he takes to be the assumptions of the genealogical program. This will be enough to bring MacIntyre's argument into view, since if those are indeed conditions of personal identity and assumptions of the genealogical program, it is not possible, at he argues, to so much as attempt to carry out that program without denying some of its fundamental assumptions. But in a second stage, I will argue that MacIntyre's argument fails on two counts: what he identifies as conditions of personal identity are only conditions for a relatively restrictive conception of personal identity, and what he identifies as assumptions of the genealogical program are only assumptions of naive conceptions of that program. There are more sophisticated versions, notably Nietzsche's and Foucault's, that do not rely on some of those assumptions.

6.2.1 *MacIntyre's Conception of the Conditions of Personal Identity*

MacIntyre motivates his conception of personal identity through the following steps. First, a claim that like any debate, a debate between Nietzschean genealogists and Aristotelian-Thomist traditionalists is a polemical conversation, of which the following claims are true:

Crucial to polemical conversations therefore is how the different and disagreeing participants understand the identity and continuity of those with whom they speak, of how each stands in relation to his or her past and future utterances in what he or she says now. Underlying the conflicts of polemical conversations are the rival participants' presuppositions about continuing personal identity through time.¹²

From this observation, MacIntyre goes on to present his own presuppositions concerning personal identity:

[P]art of being the same person throughout time is *having one and the same body*.

12. MacIntyre, *Three rival versions of moral enquiry : encyclopedia, genealogy, and tradition : being Gifford lectures delivered in the University of Edinburgh in 1988*, p. 196.

Secondly, I as a member of more than one community engage in transactions extended through time with others, and because I within my community undertake projects extended through time, it must be possible throughout this bodily life to impute *continuing accountability* for agency. [...] So part of being one and the same person throughout this bodily life is being continuously liable to account for my actions, attitudes and beliefs to others within my communities. Thirdly, because my life is understood as a teleologically ordered unity, a whole the nature of which and the good of which I have to learn how to discover, *my life has the unity and the continuity of a quest, a quest whose object is to discover that truth about my life as a whole which is an indispensable part of the good of that life.*¹³ So on this view my life has the unity of a story with a beginning, a middle and an end, beginning with birth and ending, so far as concerns the final judgement to be passed on it—in respect of the achievement of its good—with death.¹⁴

MacIntyre further explains that the satisfaction of these conditions by an individual require that she make certain assumptions. In particular, that life take the form of a continued and unified quest for knowledge of the good life requires that the individual that undertakes such a quest assume that such a quest has an object, that there is a truth about the good life: “*In making the nature of my own life and the good of that life the object of my enquiry, I clearly presuppose that there is a truth to be discovered about that life and its good.*”¹⁵ Similarly, the idea of accountability is indissociable from certain views about truth, language and meaning:

[A] conception of a truth beyond and ordering all particular truths; a conception of a range of senses in the light of which utterances to be judged true or false [by

13. All emphases are mine.

14. MacIntyre, *Three rival versions of moral enquiry : encyclopedia, genealogy, and tradition : being Gifford lectures delivered in the University of Edinburgh in 1988*, pp. 198-199.

15. MacIntyre, *Three rival versions of moral enquiry : encyclopedia, genealogy, and tradition : being Gifford lectures delivered in the University of Edinburgh in 1988*, p. 200.

those before to whom an account of one's life is presented] and so placed within that ordering are to be construed; a conception of a range of genres utterance, dramatic, lyrical, historical, and the like, by reference to which utterances may be classified so that we may then proceed to identify their true sense; and a contrast between those uses of genres in which one way or another truth is at stake and those governed instead only by standards of rhetorical effectiveness.¹⁶

6.2.2 *MacIntyre's Understanding of the Genealogical Program, and the Resulting Criticism*

MacIntyre's presents the elements of the genealogical method that render it vulnerable to his objection by comparing the genealogist and the Thomist (his paradigmatic figure of the partisan of tradition-based approaches to moral inquiry):

[(1)] Where the Thomist raises the question of those who affirm and deny to the truth by which they are measured and by reference to which they are to be held accountable, the genealogist follows Nietzsche in dismissing any notion of *the* truth and correspondingly any conception of *what is* as such and timelessly as contrasted with what seems to be the case from a variety of different perspectives. So one aspect of accountability, that which relates it to the truth, disappears from view. [(2)] Where the Thomist understands texts in terms of a relatively fixed, even if analogically related and historically developed, set of meanings and genres, the post-Nietzschean genealogist envisages an indefinite multiplicity of interpretative possibilities, so that the speaker or writer is no more tied down by the given determinateness of his or her utterances than by what the genealogist takes to be a fictitious relationship to the truth. Thus a second aspect of accountability is taken to have been discredited. And [(3)] where the Thomist conceives

16. MacIntyre, *Three rival versions of moral enquiry : encyclopedia, genealogy, and tradition : being Gifford lectures delivered in the University of Edinburgh in 1988*, p. 200.

of appeal to the standards implicit in and partially definitive of dialectical and confessional activity as providing a possibility of rescuing ourselves from those relationships of power through which the rebellious will either masters other wills or is mastered by them, the genealogist understands both Socratic dialectic and Augustinian confession as distorting expressions—not of the will, for the will is, On Nietzsche’s view, just one more metaphysical fiction—but rather of that impersonal will to power whose symptoms are those of a disguised *ressentiment*. So what looks like someone’s rendering him or herself accountable is in fact something very different, an unrecognized exercise of power in the abasement of self or of others.¹⁷

It is clear how, based on his conception of the conditions of personal identity, and his conception of the genealogist’s commitments, the genealogical program turns out to be problematic:

[I]n repudiating all key features of accountability [...] the genealogist has perhaps made it impossible to satisfy the precondition for at least those ascriptions of personal identity and continuity which involve accountability. Yet the genealogist almost invariably and perhaps inescapably uses language in such a way as to presuppose ascriptions of both identity and continuity to persons.¹⁸

Note that this formulation of the problem stands in need of revision. It is not enough to say that the genealogist has *perhaps* made it impossible to satisfy the preconditions for accountability, that the genealogist *almost invariably and perhaps inescapably* uses language that presupposes the satisfaction of those conditions. That the genealogist may be constrained to assume the satisfaction of conditions to whose unsatisfiability she may be

17. MacIntyre, *Three rival versions of moral enquiry : encyclopedia, genealogy, and tradition : being Gifford lectures delivered in the University of Edinburgh in 1988*, p. 205.

18. MacIntyre, *Three rival versions of moral enquiry : encyclopedia, genealogy, and tradition : being Gifford lectures delivered in the University of Edinburgh in 1988*, p. 205.

committed is not enough to ground the claim that the genealogical project cannot be carried out. What is required is rather a claim to the effect that the genealogist is constrained to assume the satisfaction of conditions the satisfaction of which is ruled out by her position. Short of this, the strongest conclusion to which MacIntyre is entitled is the claim that genealogists have almost invariably made assumptions that may have been excluded by their views. Since MacIntyre's goal is to establish the stronger and more interesting claim, that is the claim that I will consider in what follows. I shall argue by counter-example. Since MacIntyre's strategy is to focus on Foucault's genealogical project (as the best exemplar of that kind), and to argue that the mere fact that Foucault accepted a chair at the *Collège de France* is evidence that he subscribed to certain assumptions about accountability whose falsehood is implied by the genealogical method, I shall focus on Foucault's case.

MacIntyre's objection to genealogy ultimately consists in the claims that the possibility of rational debate depends on the satisfaction of certain conditions, the conditions of accountability, and the claim that the genealogical project renders the fulfillment of these conditions impossible. The plausibility of genealogy may thus be defended either by providing a genealogical critique of accountability, and showing that the execution of the genealogical project is consistent with the results of that critique, or by accepting what we may refer to as the accountability constraint, and denying that the genealogical project implies that the conditions of accountability cannot be fulfilled. While I shall, for the sake of brevity, adopt the second strategy, let me note that the first one would also be faithful to Foucault's ethical views. Yet I shall grant, for the sake of brevity, the validity of the accountability constraint, and show that it is not the case that the genealogical project implies that the conditions for accountability cannot be fulfilled.

In characterizing his own view, MacIntyre uses the ability to respond to Socratic examination as a standard of accountability:

In making the nature of my own life and the good of that life the object of my enquiry, I clearly presuppose that there is a truth to be discovered about that

life and its good, which may, of course, evade discovery; so I must ask: through what form of social engagement and learning can the errors which may obstruct the discovery of truth be brought to light? The first and basic answers to these questions are those proposed by Socrates. It is only insofar as someone satisfies the conditions for rendering himself or herself vulnerable to dialectical refutation that that person can come to know whether and what he or she knows.¹⁹

Since as we shall see in the next chapter, Foucault also highlighted the importance of the idea of Socratic *exetasis* or cross-examination and of Socratic accountability, this common reference suggests that there is considerable overlap between MacIntyre's and Foucault's views on the importance of ethical accountability. However, what MacIntyre goes on to write seems to suggest that the overlap is only partial:

It is only by belonging to a community systematically engaged in a dialectical enterprise in which the standards are sovereign over the contending parties that one can begin to learn the truth, first by learning the truth about one's own error, not error from this or that point of view but error as such, the shadow cast by truth as such: contradiction in respect to utterance about the virtues.²⁰

Without further clarification, it is not obvious whether the ideas of truth as such, of error as such, and of contradiction about utterance of the virtues are congenial to a genealogical perspective *à la* Foucault. But we can set aside for present purposes these aspects of MacIntyre's conception of Socratic accountability. The present point is that it is clear that like MacIntyre, Foucault subscribes to a version of the accountability constraint, and that the version that he subscribes to is, like MacIntyre's based on the idea that the ethical agent ought to be able to account for her way of life in a way that would resist Socratic examination. The fact that both MacIntyre and Foucault subscribe to Socratic versions of the

19. MacIntyre, *Three rival versions of moral enquiry : encyclopedia, genealogy, and tradition : being Gifford lectures delivered in the University of Edinburgh in 1988*, p. 200.

20. MacIntyre, *Three rival versions of moral enquiry : encyclopedia, genealogy, and tradition : being Gifford lectures delivered in the University of Edinburgh in 1988*, p. 200.

accountability constraint suggests that if Foucault's version of genealogy is not vulnerable to MacIntyre's objection, it must be because contrary to what the objection suggests, it is not the case that the carrying out the genealogical project makes it impossible to satisfy the constraint.

As we saw, the idea that the genealogist cannot satisfy the accountability constraint is based on MacIntyre's attribution of three claims to the genealogist. However, the attribution of these three claims to Foucault is unwarranted. To see this, let's consider each of them in turn:

1. [T]he genealogist follows Nietzsche in dismissing any notion of *the* truth and correspondingly any conception of *what is* as such and timelessly as contrasted with what seems to be the case from a variety of different perspectives [...]²¹

It is true that there are ways of understanding phrases like “the truth” and “what is” in which Foucault rejects the reality of what they denote. If ‘truth as such’ and ‘what is as such’ mean ‘truth considered independently of the thinking subject’ and ‘the phenomena about which discourse is about considered independently of the thinking and speaking subject,’ then Foucault certainly rejects the contentfulness of the notions (much like Kant does). Yet importantly, rejecting these notions is not rejecting the idea that—the truth of—discourse is partially constrained by a reality—of what is—independent of that discourse. What Foucault rejected is only the idea that the truthfulness of discourse is constrained by something that can be thought of independently of discourse, and consequently, that the truthfulness of discourse can itself be considered independently of discourse. Foucault does not deny that there is truth, only that the truth of statements that are recognized as such is independent of the concrete, historical conditions within which they are formulated and recognized as true.

21. MacIntyre, *Three rival versions of moral enquiry : encyclopedia, genealogy, and tradition : being Gifford lectures delivered in the University of Edinburgh in 1988*, p. 205.

2. [T]he post-Nietzschean genealogist envisages an indefinite multiplicity of interpretative possibilities, so that the speaker or writer is no more tied down by the given determinateness of his or her utterances than by what the genealogist takes to be a fictitious relationship to the truth [...]²²

But that different perspectives may be adopted towards a given claim does not imply that there are no constraints on interpretation, or that adopting any of these possible perspectives is equally legitimate regardless of the circumstances. Remember, for instance, Foucault's change of attitude toward psychiatry in the early fifties. In Chapter 3, I described the Nietzschean turn as a shift in Foucault's perspective towards psychiatry and, more generally, the social or human sciences: a shift from an approach that consisted in holding psychiatric theory and practice to their internal scientific standards, to holding it to epistemological, ethical and political standards that are external to it. Adopting that standpoint (external to science) was a methodological choice, motivated by the 'discovery' of the truth that truth itself has a history, and that truth is informed by and in turn informs social reality. But adopting that standpoint did not require denying that other standpoints may be adopted. It is not even inconsistent with the admission that adopting the internal standpoint of science can be legitimate, as it certainly is for the scientist. Acknowledging that scientific practice is determined by and determines extra-scientific fact does not require denying that scientific practice is guided by an ideal of truthfulness and that scientific theories can come more or less close to the fulfillment of that ideal. Again, think about Foucault's claim in the unpublished interview mentioned in Chapter 3 to the effect that psychiatry in France in the 1950s had so much power, yet so little knowledge. Foucault's point is not that mental illness is nothing but the invention of psychiatrists. His point is only that mental illness can also be spoken of from a variety of perspectives: the perspective of the scientist who advances the theory and who, as Foucault often recognizes explicitly, is increasingly aware of the non-scientific

22. MacIntyre, *Three rival versions of moral enquiry : encyclopedia, genealogy, and tradition : being Gifford lectures delivered in the University of Edinburgh in 1988*, p. 205.

factors that lend shape to theorizing; the perspective of the intellectual who in the name of the victims of various practices supported by psychiatric theory, criticizes the latter; of the radical militant who thinks that intellectual criticism is idle, and that developing a marxist psychiatry is the only legitimate course of action; the mentally ill themselves, who can talk about their experiences as they were informed by both mental illness, by the institutionalized practices built around psychiatric discourse, by the coping mechanisms that they were able to find outside those psychiatric practices.

3. [T]he genealogist understands both Socratic dialectic and Augustinian confession as distorting expressions—not of the will, for the will is, on Nietzsche’s view, just one more metaphysical fiction—but rather of that impersonal will to power whose symptoms are those of a disguised *ressentment* [...] ²³

But from the genealogical standpoint, Socratic dialectics, like any other expression of the will to power, is distorting only insofar as it claims not to be, among other things, an expression of the will to power. This does imply that genealogy is incompatible with various practices that one may place under the ambiguous heading ‘Socratic dialectics.’ But it also implies that genealogy is not incompatible with every practice that may reasonably be placed under that heading and which involves Socratic accountability. For there may be—and as we shall see in Chapter 7, there is—a conception of Socratic accountability that does not deny, but rather affirms, that one’s way of living is an expression of the will to power.

Consequently, none of MacIntyre’s three claims show that genealogy is incompatible with accountability. In fact, the idea of genealogical critique, as described by Foucault in *What is Enlightenment*, is not incompatible with, but a condition of possibility of, the attainment of the state of majority, or of the adequate use of reason, that alone make accountability possible.

23. MacIntyre, *Three rival versions of moral enquiry : encyclopedia, genealogy, and tradition : being Gifford lectures delivered in the University of Edinburgh in 1988*, p. 205.

6.3 MacIntyre's Aristotelianism or Foucault's Nietzscheanism?

In *After Virtue*, after diagnosing the contemporary crisis in ethical discourse, MacIntyre identifies Aristotelianism and Nietzscheanism as the two main attitudes one may adopt towards that crisis, and in the pivotal chapter of the book, *Aristotle or Nietzsche?*, attempts to defend the former over the latter.

How does MacIntyre conceive of the choice between Aristotelianism and Nietzscheanism? MacIntyre describes what he takes to be the core of Nietzsche's moral philosophy in the following passage:

There can be no place for such fictions as natural rights, utility, the greatest happiness of the greatest number. I myself must now bring into existence 'new tables of what is good.' 'We, however, want to become those we are — human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves.'²⁴ The rational and rationally justified autonomous moral subject of the eighteenth century is a fiction, an illusion; so, Nietzsche resolves, let will replace reason and let us make ourselves into autonomous moral subjects by some gigantic and heroic act of the will, an act of the will that by its quality may remind us of that archaic aristocratic self-assertiveness which preceded what Nietzsche took to be the disaster of slave-morality and which by its effectiveness may be the prophetic precursor of a new era. The problem then is how to construct in an entirely original way, how to invent a new table of what is good and a law, a problem which arises for each individual. This problem would constitute the core of a Nietzschean moral philosophy.²⁵

On this construal of Nietzsche's position, which I shall henceforth refer to as individualist voluntarism, or simply as voluntarism, each individual has to give itself a moral view or a set

24. Cf. (MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 266).

25. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 114.

of virtues by an act of the will. MacIntyre regards this as a consequence of the view that moral judgements cannot be rationally justified because they are the result of the rationalization of non-rational phenomena. He concedes to Nietzsche that within the modern context, moral judgements cannot be rationally justified. But he thinks Nietzsche is wrong to generalize, to turn that claim about modern and contemporary moral thought and discourse into a claim about the relation of morality and reason in general. What we should infer from the fact that moral discourse cannot be rationally justified from the modern perspective is rather that it was a mistake to abandon Aristotelianism in the first place:

[T]he power of Nietzsche's position depends upon the truth of one central thesis: that all rational vindications of morality manifestly fail and that therefore belief in the tenets of morality needs to be explained in terms of a set of rationalizations which conceal the fundamentally non-rational phenomena of the will. My own argument obliges me to agree with Nietzsche that the philosophers of the Enlightenment never succeeded in providing grounds for doubting his central thesis; his epigrams are even deadlier than his extended arguments. But, if my earlier argument is correct, that failure itself was nothing other than an historical sequel to the rejection of the Aristotelian tradition. And thus the key question does indeed become: can Aristotle's ethics, or something very like it, after all be vindicated? [...]

What then the conjunction of philosophical and historical argument reveals is that either one must follow through the aspirations and the collapse of the different versions of the Enlightenment project until there remains only the Nietzschean diagnosis and the Nietzschean problematic or one must hold that the Enlightenment project was not only mistaken, but should never have been commenced in the first place. There is no third alternative [...].²⁶

26. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 117-118.

Thus, McIntyre presents Nietzsche's voluntarism as the logical consequence of and the historical sequel to the internal limitations to the Enlightenment project of giving a rational justification for morality while prescind of a conception of human life as having a *telos*. Thus construed, Nietzsche's position seems closer to an admission of defeat than to the acquisition of genuine insight. Voluntarism, as MacIntyre conceives it, is rendered necessary by the apparent realization that the best case scenario is not realizable: it is not possible to provide a rational justification of morality. But this realization rests on a failure to recognize that the source of the impossibility of rationally grounding morality lies in the abandonment of an Aristotelian conception of human being, rather than on the relationship between rationality and morality in general. From this perspective, so long as it is possible to recover (i.e. to rationally vindicate) certain key elements of Aristotelianism, and in particular a teleological conception of human life, the moral predicament of the Enlightenment can be avoided, and Nietzscheanism is stripped of any semblance of appeal.

Hence the defensibility of the Nietzschean position turns *in the end* on the answer to the question: was it right in the first place to reject Aristotle? For if Aristotle's position in ethics and politics — or something very like it — could be sustained, the whole Nietzschean enterprise would be pointless.²⁷

Most of the remainder of *After Virtue* is dedicated to the defense of Aristotelianism.

6.3.1 *What is Required for the Success of a Defense of Aristotelianism?*

In order to assess MacIntyre's attempt to defend Aristotelianism over Nietzscheanism, it will be useful to reflect on the conditions of success of that task. As we saw, MacIntyre's diagnosis of his contemporary state of moral discourse is based on the idea that Aristotelianism is characterized by a teleological schema for thinking about morality.²⁸ The central

27. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 117.

28. See p. 187 above.

element of the schema was the conception of “the-human-as-she-could-be-if-she-realized-her-essential-nature.” The central element was (i) the idea that human life has a *telos*, and (ii) a substantive conception of what that *telos* is. His diagnosis of the state of moral discourse was that it was the abandonment of this teleological conception of human being that led to the impossibility of providing a rational vindication for morality, and that thus made Nietzscheanism seem ultimately unavoidable. Thus in order to succeed in a defense of Aristotelianism over Nietzscheanism, it is necessary to defend a teleological conception of human being. But what is required in order to succeed in this task?

There are three main requirements:

- (a) A conception of a way of life, of a *human telos*;
- (b) That such a way of life be recognizable as morally good;
- (c) An argument to the effect that not striving to live that way is irrational.

The third condition is necessary in order to guarantee that the choice of Aristotelianism over Nietzscheanism is rationally grounded. Pending such an argument, the Aristotelian has at best provided a conception of a life that can be recognized as morally good from a certain perspective. Without an argument to the effect that not striving to live such a life is irrational, it is always open to the Nietzschean to claim that the Aristotelian’s commitment to live such a life is not based on reason, that no rational vindication of morality has been provided at all.

How exactly is the third condition to be understood? One may distinguish between minimal or loose and maximal or strict conceptions of what is involved in being rational and, correlatively, irrational. The minimal conception would be one according to which being rational, in any sense that can be regarded as characteristic of being human, is guaranteed by the possession and exercise of the ability to act *for reasons and understand oneself as doing so*. The maximal conception would be one according to which to be rational, in the

sense that is characteristic of humans, is *to always act for 'the best reasons' and understand oneself as doing so.*

Now, condition (c), that an argument to the effect that not striving to live in the Aristotelian way is irrational, will be impossibly stringent if 'irrationality' is heard in the way that corresponds to the minimal sense of rationality than otherwise. This would imply that Aristotelianism cannot be defended over Nietzscheanism unless it can be shown that living in a non-Aristotelian way amounts to never exercising the capacity to act for reasons and understand that one is doing so. So the plausibility of condition (c) requires that it be read as the requirement for an argument to the effect that not living in the Aristotelian way would be irrational, in the sense of "irrational" that corresponds to a maximal sense of "rational." The idea would be that while it is possible to live a non-Aristotelian life and still be rational in a loose or minimal sense, being fully rational, acting for the best reasons, requires living an Aristotelian life.

But now note in passing, that this implies that there is a further condition of success of a defense of a MacIntyre-style Aristotelianism over the full range of versions of Nietzscheanism:

- (d) An argument to the effect that not striving to live rationally (in the maximal sense) is irrational (in the minimal sense).

Short of this, the Aristotelian would have shown that living the Aristotelian life and living 'fully' rationally are of a piece. But she would not have shown that every individual ought to consider that way of living preferable to any other. And it is this that the Aristotelian has to show. For it is open to the Nietzschean to grant that minimal rationality is characteristic of human life, but to deny that maximal rationality is a practical ideal that every individual ought to pursue. Consequently, even if conditions (a), (b) and (c) are met, the Nietzschean of this strand can argue that the type of rational vindication of Aristotelianism over Nietzscheanism that has been provided is insufficient to establish the plausibility of the Aristotelian approach to ethics. For it rests on the controversial assumption that living

maximally rationally is a universal practical ideal.²⁹ Unless her commitment to the fact that humans are minimally rational constrains her to accept maximal rationality as a practical ideal, she will have been given no conclusive reason to see commitment to Aristotelianism as based on anything other than an act of the will.

Note that since MacIntyre's goal is to defend Aristotelianism over Nietzscheanism, his success depends on whether he provides what would be recognizable as a rational vindication of morality from a standpoint that does not assume the correctness of either view. It is for this reason that the appeal to anything but a minimal conception of rationality as a practical ideal requires a supplementary argument along the lines just outlined. Short of that, the best that the neutral examiner of MacIntyre's argument should conclude is that Aristotelianism is required for anyone who subscribes to the relevant non-minimal conception of rationality as a practical ideal (i.e. to the idea that one ought to live more-than-minimally rationally). But this enough for the Nietzschean to reject MacIntyre's argument, for him to show that ultimately, the moral commitments of the Aristotelian rest on an assumption that cannot be rationally motivated from anything less than a more-than-minimal conception of rationality.

I hope it is clear, in light of the last few paragraphs, that a successful rejection of Nietzscheanism of the kind envisaged by MacIntyre requires satisfying all the conditions that I have mentioned. However, in what follows, I will only consider conditions (a), (b) and (c). The reason is that, on the one hand, this is sufficient to show that MacIntyre's attempt to reject Nietzscheanism is unsuccessful, and on the other hand, a full defense of condition (d) would require a more precise specification of the distinction between minimal and more-than-minimal conceptions of rationality, and that would take us too far afield.

29. Between the minimal and the maximal conceptions of rationality, there is a wide range of 'in-between' views. Any non-minimal conception of rationality, any conception of rationality that sets further constraints on what it is to be rational than the minimal one, belongs in that range. I have chosen to limit the discussion to two extreme versions for the sake of brevity and clarity, but it should be noted what I have said about maximal conceptions of rationality applies, *mutatis mutandi*, to any more-than-minimal conception of rationality. Grounding a refutation of the Nietzschean claim that morality lacks a rational basis on a more-than-minimal conception of rationality would require a rational-in-the-minimal-sense motivation of more-than-minimal-rationality as a practical ideal.

6.3.2 *Does MacIntyre's Defense of Aristotelianism Succeed?*

In order to determine whether MacIntyre succeeds in defending Aristotelianism over Nietzscheanism it is necessary to first bring into view MacIntyre's defense. In order to minimize the risk of misrepresenting his view, I shall once again take license to quote extensively instead of paraphrasing.

MacIntyre's strategy for defending Aristotelianism over Nietzscheanism consists in showing the necessity of pursuing certain virtues. It is, accordingly, based on a particular conception of the virtues. This conception of the virtues is motivated in two stages. The first stage involves two steps: the introduction of a technical conception of a practice and, on that basis, the defense of a partial account of the virtues:

By a 'practice' I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. Tic-tac-toe is not an example of a practice in this sense, nor is throwing a football with skill; but the game of football is, and so is chess. Bricklaying is not a practice; architecture is. Planting turnips is not a practice; farming is.³⁰

But what does all or any of this have to do with the concept of the virtues? It turns out that we are now in a position to formulate a first, even if partial and tentative definition of a virtue: *A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.*³¹

30. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 187.

31. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 191.

The reason that MacIntyre characterizes that conception of the virtues as partial and tentative is that, based on that account, the only explanation available for the pursuit of a given virtue is an already established interest in participating in the relevantly related practices. Consequently, this account does not, on its own, provide the resources to understand the link between the virtues and the existence of a human *telos*, between the virtues and a universal human good:

I stressed earlier that any account of the virtues in terms of practices could only be a partial and first account. What is required to complement it? The most notable difference so far between my account and any account that could be called Aristotelian is that although I have in no way restricted the exercise of the virtues to the context of practices, it is in terms of practices that I have located their point and function. Whereas Aristotle locates that point and function in terms of the notion of a type of whole human life which can be called good. And it does seem that the question ‘What would a human being lack who lacked the virtues?’ must be given a kind of answer which goes beyond anything which I have said so far. For such an individual would not merely fail in a variety of particular ways in respect of the kind of excellence which can be achieved through participation in practices and in respect of the kind of human relationship required to sustain such excellence. His own life viewed as a whole would perhaps be defective; it would not be the kind of life which someone would describe in trying to answer the question ‘What is the best kind of life for this kind of man or woman to live?’ And that question cannot be answered without at least raising Aristotle’s own question, ‘What is the good life for man?’ [...].³²

Thus the necessity for a second stage in MacIntyre’s account of the virtues, one that completes that partial account of the virtues:

32. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 201.

I have suggested so far that unless there is a *telos* which transcends the limited goods of practices by constituting the good of a whole human life, the good of a human life conceived as a unity, it will both be the case that a certain subversive arbitrariness will invade the moral life and that we shall be unable to specify the context of certain virtues adequately. [...]

It is clear therefore that my preliminary account of the virtues in terms of practices captures much, but very far from all, of what the Aristotelian tradition taught about the virtues. It is also clear that to give an account that is at once more fully adequate to the tradition and rationally defensible, it is necessary to raise a question to which the Aristotelian tradition presupposed an answer, an answer so widely shared in the pre-modern world that it never had to be formulated explicitly in any detailed way. *This question is: is it rationally justifiable to conceive each human life as a unity, so that we may try to specify each such life as having its good and so that we may understand the virtues as having their function in enabling an individual to make his or her life one kind of unity rather than another?*³³

The remaining part of MacIntyre's defense takes, accordingly, the form of an attempt to answer this question. The core of the argument involves three stages. The first one is an argument for the view that the unity of an individual life consists in the unity of a narrative. The starting point is the uncontroversial idea that actions are intelligible only by reference to intentions, coupled with the further claim that the intelligibility of intentions requires that they be situated within the narrative unity of a whole life:

Consider another equally trivial example of a set of compatible answers to the question 'What is he doing?': 'Writing a sentence'; 'Finishing his his book'; 'Contributing to the debate on the theory of action'; 'Trying to get tenure.'

33. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 203 (my emphasis).

Here the intentions can be ordered in terms of the stretch of time to which reference is made. Each of the shorter-term intentions is, and can only be made, intelligible by reference to some longer-term intentions; and the characterization of the behavior in terms of the longer-term intentions can only be correct if some of the characterizations in terms of shorter-term intentions are also correct. Hence the behavior is only characterized adequately when we know what the longer and longest-term intentions invoked are and how the shorter-term intentions are related to the longer. Once again we are involved in writing a narrative history.³⁴

This completes the first stage of MacIntyre's defense of Aristotelianism:

It is now possible to return to the question³⁵ from which this enquiry into the nature of human action and identity started: In what does the unity of an individual life consist? The answer is that its unity is the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life.³⁶

This, however, only provides a partial answer to what he had identified as the question that needed to be addressed in order to complete the account of the virtues.³⁷ That question was not only whether "it is rationally justifiable to conceive each human life as a unity,"³⁸ but also whether this was possible in a way enabled us "to specify each such life as having its good and so that we may understand the virtues as having their function in enabling an individual to make his or her life one kind of unity rather than another."³⁹ Hence the need for the second stage, a move from the idea that the intelligibility of action requires that it be situated within the unity of a life, to the idea that there is a particular type of unity that makes a life morally good:

34. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 207-208.

35. The question that MacIntyre is alluding to is the one quoted on p. 208 above.

36. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 218.

37. See p. 208 above.

38. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 203.

39. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 203.

In what does the unity of an individual life consist? The answer is that its unity is the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life. To ask ‘What is the good for me?’ is to ask how best I might live out that unity and bring it to completion. To ask ‘What is the good for man?’ is to ask what all answers to the former question must have in common. But now it is important to emphasize that it is the systematic asking of these two questions and the attempt to answer them in deed as well as in word which provide the moral life with its unity. The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest. Quests sometimes fail, are frustrated, abandoned or dissipated into distractions; and human lives may in all these ways also fail. But the only criteria for success or failure in a human life as a whole are the criteria of success or failure in a narrated or to-be-narrated quest. A quest for what? [...] Some conception of the good for man is required. Whence is such a conception to be drawn? Precisely from those questions which led us to attempt to transcend that limited conception of the virtues which is available in and through practices. It is in looking for a conception of the good which will enable us to order other goods, for a conception of the good which will enable us to extend our understanding of the purpose and content of the virtues, for a conception of the good which will enable us to understand the place of integrity and constancy in life, that we initially define the kind of life which is a quest for the good.⁴⁰

Thus according to MacIntyre, a life is morally good if it has a certain kind of unity, the kind of unity characteristic of a life that is oriented towards the pursuit of the morally good life. This completes the second stage of MacIntyre’s account of the virtues:

The virtues therefore are to be understood as those dispositions which will not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices,

40. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 218-219.

but which will also sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good, by enabling us to overcome the harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which we encounter, and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good. The catalogue of the virtues will therefore include the virtues required to sustain the kind of households and the kind of political communities in which men and women can seek for the good together and the virtues necessary for philosophical enquiry about the character of the good. We have then arrived at a provisional conclusion about the good life for man: the good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man, and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is.⁴¹

The third stage is rendered necessary because the life spent in seeking the good is a life that takes place in the context of a tradition, and it is from their tradition that any individual can and is in fact bound to draw in order to answer the question of what the good life is:

The virtues therefore are to be understood as those dispositions which will not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices, but which will also sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good, by enabling us to overcome the harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which we encounter, and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good. The catalogue of the virtues will therefore include the virtues required to sustain the kind of households and the kind of political communities in which men and women can seek for the good together and the virtues necessary for philosophical enquiry about the character of the good. We have then arrived at a provisional conclusion about the good life for man: the good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for

41. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 219.

man, and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is.⁴²

In brief, MacIntyre's defense of Aristotelianism is based on (1) the claim that the intelligibility of human action requires that the action be situated in the context of the narrative unity of the life of the relevant agent; (2) the claim that the morally good human life is a life that has particular type of narrative unity: the unity of a life dedicated to the intellectual and practical pursuit of the good life; and (3) the claim that the starting point of the pursuit of the good life must be the tradition to which the relevant individual belongs: it is from her tradition that the individual inherits the unifying conception of human life that grounds the factual character of moral judgements.⁴³

6.3.3 Does MacIntyre's Defense of Aristotelianism Fulfill Its conditions of Success?

Earlier on,⁴⁴ I argued that the success of MacIntyre's defense of Aristotelian over Nietzschean approaches to ethics depends on the satisfaction of the following conditions:

- (a) A conception of a way of life, of a *human telos*;
- (b) That such a way of life be recognizable as morally good;
- (c) An argument to the effect that not striving to live that way is irrational;
- (d) An argument to the effect that not striving to live rationally (in a maximal sense) is irrational (in a minimal sense).

I also pointed out that satisfaction of the fourth condition is only necessary in order to defend Aristotelianism against certain versions of Nietzscheanism, versions of Nietzscheanism that

42. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 219.

43. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 225.

44. See 6.3.1, p. 203 above.

would not accept, absent an argument that does not presuppose a maximal conception of rationality, that being rational in a maximal sense is a practical ideal.

MacIntyre's account of the virtues does not satisfy these conditions. It provides a conception of a way of life that can be recognizable as morally good, and that under certain conditions, can be taken to be the *telos* of an individual, but it does not provide a conception of a way of life is recognizable as the morally good life and which constitutes the *telos* of human life as such, and it does not provide an argument to the effect that not living in accordance with that *telos* is irrational. These can be seen through the following considerations.

The Problem with the Argument from Intelligibility

The first stage of his account of the virtues consists, as we saw, in the claim that the intelligibility of human action requires that actions be situated within the narrative unity of a complete life. This claim can be heard in two ways, a strongly restrictive one according to which actions are not intelligible *at all* independently of a unified narrative about the overall life of their agents, or as a weak, less restrictive one according to which actions can be *partially, though not adequately* characterized independently of such narratives, in a sense of "adequately" that stands in need of specification.

It seems to me that only the weaker version of this claim is plausible. For consider Parker, who has bought tickets online for an event. Based on the previous sentence, you don't know much about him (or is it her?). You know that Parker has access to the internet and bought tickets for an event. Not much more. Not even what the tickets are for (reselling? giving as a gift? using with a friend, a partner, a colleague?), what he or she does for a living, his or her age, his or her attitude toward morality, etc. Yet the action in question, that Parker has bought tickets online, is intelligible to you. It is certainly not the case that actions are not intelligible *at all* independently of the narrative unity of the life of their agents.

So the charitable interpretation of the claim that the intelligibility of human action re-

quires that actions be situated within the narrative unity of a complete life is the weaker one: “until we know [the agents’ various intentions in accomplishing the action and their relative weight], we shall not know *correctly* how to characterize what the agent is doing”⁴⁵; “the behavior *is only characterized adequately* when we know what the longer and longest-term intentions invoked are and how the shorter-term intentions are related to the longer.”^{46,47}

But there is a problem. The weak version of the claim cannot serve as the basis for an argument to the effect that not living the Aristotelian life is irrational. For in order to do so, it would have to make reference not to just any kind of narrative unity, but to the distinctive type of unity that is characteristic of the Aristotelian morally good life. Otherwise, the argument would at best establish that it is irrational not to live in a way that leads to one’s life having *some* kind of narrative unity, but since living in a way that involves some kind of narrative unity is at any rate inevitable, this would not imply that living an Aristotelian life is necessary for living rationally.

The Vacuous Good; Substantive Goods; The Moral Good

It is perhaps possible to construe MacIntyre’s account of the virtues differently. Under this alternative construal, the claim concerning the intelligibility of action is not meant to serve as the premise for an argument intended to show that it is irrational not to live the Aristotelian life. The argument for that conclusion would be rather a constitutivist one to the effect that: (1) it is irrational for an individual not to pursue her own good, while (2) pursuing her own good rationally requires pursuing the Aristotelian good life.

The problem with this construal of MacIntyre’s argument is that if it is correct, MacIntyre’s argument is incomplete. To see this, consider again the passage in which MacIntyre transitions from the idea the life of an individual must have a narrative unity, to the idea

45. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 207.

46. Both emphases are mine.

47. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 208.

that the morally good life is the life dedicated to the pursuit of the morally good life:

In what does the unity of an individual life consist? The answer is that its unity is the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life. To ask ‘What is the good for me?’ is to ask how best I might live out that unity and bring it to completion. To ask ‘What is the good for man?’ is to ask what all answers to the former question must have in common. But now it is important to emphasize that it is the systematic asking of these two questions and the attempt to answer them in deed as well as in word which provide the moral life with its unity. The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest. Quests sometimes fail, are frustrated, abandoned or dissipated into distractions; and human lives may in all these ways also fail. But the only criteria for success or failure in a human life as a whole are the criteria of success or failure in a narrated or to-be-narrated quest. A quest for what? [...] Some conception of the good for man is required. Whence is such a conception to be drawn? Precisely from those questions which led us to attempt to transcend that limited conception of the virtues which is available in and through practices. It is in looking for a conception of the good which will enable us to order other goods, for a conception of the good which will enable us to extend our understanding of the purpose and content of the virtues, for a conception of the good which will enable us to understand the place of integrity and constancy in life, that we initially define the kind of life which is a quest for the good.⁴⁸

The main problem with this passage is that involves three different kinds of uses of the term “good.” The first kind may be described as vacuous or attitude-dependent, since to say that something is good for someone is, on such uses, just to say that that individual regards it as worth pursuing. On the second use, to say that something is good for someone is to

48. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 218-219.

say that it would be good for the individual to pursue it, regardless of what the relevant individual thinks. This kind of use of the term “good” therefore involves an appeal, at least implicitly, to some attitude-independent standard of assessment. Accordingly, uses of this second kind may be described as substantive or attitude-independent uses. On this second use, it is possible to say that something is good for an individual regardless of her attitude, as in: ‘it is good for Marcy to apply for a highly remunerated job as an investment banker instead of pursuing her dream of becoming a journalist, since wealth is a condition for a good life, and much more likely to be obtained by pursuing a career in banking than by pursuing a career in journalism.’ The third kind of uses of “good” at work in the passage is a subspecies of the second kind, uses of “good” which appeal to *morality* as a standard of goodness. When, for instance, we think that the life of the successful charity fund embezzler is not a good life, we’re holding it up to a *distinctively moral* standard.

The passage cited above turns on the ambiguity between these three types of uses of the term good. It involves a movement from the question ‘What is the good for me?,’ to the question ‘What is the good for humans in general?,’ and from then, via the claim that “*it is the systematic asking of these two questions and the attempt to answer them in deed as well as in word which provide the moral life with its unity,*” to the question “What is the morally good life for me and for people in general?”

But this movement is problematic within the context of a defense of Aristotelianism over Nietzscheanism. From the Nietzschean perspective, it is possible to ask the question ‘What is good for me?’ in both the vacuous sense, and the substantive senses. In the vacuous sense, it amounts to the question: ‘What kind of life would I like to live?’ In the substantive sense, it amounts to the question: ‘What are the standards for assessing a person’s life that I subscribe to? What are the standards according to which I want to live?’ On the other hand, from that Nietzschean perspective, the two other questions: ‘What is the good life for people in general?’ and ‘What is the morally good life for me and for people in general?’ are at the very least problematic, since Nietzscheanism is, on MacIntyre’s own conception, the

view that it is not possible to provide a rational basis of morality, and the very possibility of raising those two questions is based on the assumption that it is possible to provide a rational basis for morality.

Put differently: the refutation of Nietzscheanism would require a justification for the move from the idea that the lives of individuals have some kind of narrative unity, to the idea that the lives of all individuals ought to display a particular type of unity, and the further claim that that type of unity is of a distinctively moral kind. But such justification is missing in the passage above, a passage which, as noted earlier, MacIntyre is explicitly attempting to answer the question of the justifiability of a conception of human life as a unity that corresponds to the Aristotelian conception of good.

Part IV

Foucault's Ethical Views

**THE CRITIQUE OF JURIDICAL REASON: AUTONOMY
WITHOUT DUTY**

In chapters 3 and 5, I introduced Foucault's technical notion of *thought* and of *forms of experience*, as well as the conceptual framework that he developed for the study of possible forms of moral conduct. The framework, conceived as a methodological tool for the study of various possible forms of moral conduct, was meant to capture the structure common to forms of moral conduct without presupposing or implying commitment to any particular normative stance. The concepts of *thought*, of *forms of experience*, and of *forms of moral conduct*, highlight the fact that normative commitments can only be grounded on other normative commitments. Normative claims are always made, accepted or rejected from a particular, situated perspective. Reason and agency 'as such,' are normatively neutral, where that does not mean that there is a purely rational standpoint that it would be possible for an agent to occupy, and which would serve as a neutral vantage point for deliberation, but on the contrary, that there is no such neutral standpoint.

It should thus not be surprising, nor a cause of concern, that Foucault's framework does not, *on its own*, provide the resources to choose between any two given forms of moral conduct, or that it does not give us insight into Foucault's substantive ethical views. The purpose of this chapter is to move, beyond the description of Foucault's conception of the form of moral conduct, to the description and analysis of Foucault's actual ethical views, from the description of Foucault's views about the form of moral conduct to the description of the substantive ethical claims that he might have committed to or advocated.

By carrying out this task, we will finally be in a position to understand Foucault's double reformulation of the nihilist slogan: from "God is dead, everything is permitted" to "how to live if I must face up to the fact that 'nothing is true'?", and from the latter, to the claim that at the heart of Western culture lies the difficulty in understanding the link between the will to truth and the aesthetics of existence.

CHAPTER 7
THE AESTHETICS OF EXISTENCE

In the later years of his career, when discussing his ethical views in interviews and various publications, Foucault almost invariably deployed the notion of an *aesthetics of existence* and the closely related idea that life might be regarded as analogous to a work of art:

To make of one's being an object of art, that is what is worth doing.¹

What strikes me is the fact that, in our society, art has become something that is related only to objects and not to individuals or to life. That art is something which is specialized or done by experts who are artists. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object but not our life?²

From Antiquity to Christianity, we pass from a morality that was essentially the search for a personal ethics to a morality as obedience to a system of rules. And if I was interested in Antiquity it was because, for a whole series of reasons, the idea of a morality as obedience to a code of rules is now disappearing, has already disappeared. And to this absence of morality corresponds, must correspond, the search for an aesthetics of existence.³

In fact, as I have insisted since the beginning of the dissertation, Foucault would go as far as to write that “[a]t the heart of Western culture lies the difficulty of establishing the link between the concern for the truth and the aesthetics of existence.”⁴

And yet, as I also mentioned early on, perhaps as a result of the influence of an early article by Hadot, the tendency in the secondary literature has been to underplay the importance of the aesthetics of existence in Foucault's ethical views. Even where its centrality is

1. Michel Foucault. “Conversation avec Werner Schroeter”. In: *Dits et écrits*. Vol. II. Gallimard, 1981. Chap. 308, pp. 1070–1079, p. 1077.

2. Michel Foucault. “Sur la généalogie de l'éthique: aperçu d'un travail un cours”. In: *Dits et écrits*. Vol. II. Gallimard, 1984, 2001. Chap. 344, pp. 1428–1450, p. 1436.

3. Michel Foucault. “An Aesthetics of Existence”. In: *Foucault Live: (interviews, 1961-1984)*. Semiotext(e), 1984, 1996. Chap. 23, pp. 309–317, p. 49.

4. Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984*, p. 190 (175).

acknowledged, it remains unaccounted for, and the idea of an aesthetics of existence tends to be interpreted in such a way as to minimize its aesthetic dimension.⁵

The goal of this chapter is to explain the role of the notion of the aesthetics of existence within Foucault's ethical views, and to show how it fits in with a wide range of themes and key concepts in Foucault's overall intellectual and political project. Building on the results of the preceding chapters, I will argue that the notion of the aesthetics of existence is best understood as the idea of a mode of subjection, on that, on Foucault's view, is best fit for the present. In other words, it is the idea of a particular way in which individuals may conceive of their relationship to the norms that they subscribe to and see themselves as bound by; it is a conception of the kind of binding force that norms can have over individuals who seek "the contemporary limits of the necessary, [... who seek] what is not or is no longer indispensable for the constitution of [them]selves as autonomous subjects"⁶; it is, in brief, the way in which individuals may think of themselves as bound by norms precisely in a historical context in which 'nothing' is true, in which the answer to the question "how should I live" is left underdetermined by any facts about 'human-being-in-general' that would have universal implications on how individuals ought to live.

But it shall be important to keep in mind that the aesthetics of existence is not meant to have the status of a universal mode of subjection that, as such, ought to inform the ethical experience of all individuals. The idea is rather that it is part of an ethical perspective, and more precisely a way of conceiving the binding force of ethical norms, *open* or *available* to individuals whose stance is described by the reformulated nihilist slogan. For someone who believes that 'nothing is true' in the sense that there are no teleological truths about

5. See, for instance, (Frédéric Gros. "Le souci de soi chez Michel Foucault". In: *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 31.5-6 [2005], pp. 697–708, pp. 704-705), (Daniele Lorenzini. "El cinismo hace de la vida una aeturgia". Apuntes para una relectura del recorrido filosófico del último Michel Foucault". In: *Revista Laguna* 23 [2008], pp. 63–90, p. 82), (Romand Coles. "Foucault's Dialogical Artistic Ethos". In: *Theory, Culture & Society* 8.2 [1991], pp. 99–120, pp. 105-106), (Thomas Flynn. "Truth and Subjectivation in the Later Foucault". In: *Journal of Philosophy* 82.10 [1985], pp. 531–540, p. 535), (Flynn, "Foucault as Parrhesiast: His Last Course at the College de France (1984)", p. 221) and (Jakub Franek. "Philosophical parrhesia as aesthetics of existence". In: *Continental philosophy review* 39.2 [2006], pp. 113–114, p. 114).

6. Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?", p. 314.

the universal telos of human life, and on the basis of which universal ethical principles could be grounded, but who at the same time does not believe that it follows from this that everything is permitted, the aesthetics of existence, we shall see, offers a strategy for addressing the question: ‘how to live?’

7.1 The Aesthetics of Existence as a Form of Care of the Self

The idea that our lives unfold as the interplay between freedom and subjection, between passive and active forms of self-constitution, has been a common thread running through the preceding four chapters. There has been, on the one hand, the idea that living a free life is a double challenge, at once conceptual and practical. A conceptual challenge, insofar as we all are constituted into the types of subjects that we are through processes of subjectivation that go in hand with our participation in the various practices that make up our lives, insofar as given that our *thought* is constituted through such processes, which for the most part ‘do not belong to the order of subjectivity,’ it is not obvious that it is at all possible to think or act freely: at all. Even if we adopt a critical stance toward a particular practice or way of thinking about a phenomena, there is always “the risk of letting ourselves be determined by more general structures of which we may well not be conscious and over which we may have no control,”⁷ structures that we have come to passively accept through those processes of subjectivation. Thus the challenge involved in the idea of a free life is conceptual insofar as it is in part the challenge to *understand* the possibility of freedom.

But the idea of living a free life also poses a practical challenge, for even if there is room in conceptual space for the possibility of a free life, there is a question as to how the individual is to attain freedom. What is more, on Foucault’s view, living freely requires actively undertaking the project of a historical critique of ourselves that “will separate, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing,

7. Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”, p. 316.

or thinking what we are, do or think.”⁸ But in light of the aforementioned risk, the risk that even when we carry out the systematic critique of ourselves, we be determined by more general structures of which we remain unconscious, our success in this project will always be at best local, partial and fragile. Our lives unfold within the interplay between freedom and subjection, and this fact about us implies that if we want to live freely, we must actively undertake and constantly renew the project of constituting ourselves as autonomous subjects. That is the practical challenge.

In order to begin to situate the notion of the aesthetics of existence, consider the following overview of one of the axes of Foucault’s research from 1978 onwards.⁹ Towards the end of his career, Foucault’s enquiry into the ways in which individuals come to be constituted into subjects, and in particular, into the ways in which individuals come to be constituted into *ethical* subjects, eventually led him to enquire into ways in which individuals come to be constituted into subjects by establishing certain types of relationship to certain types of truth, an enquiry into what was an initially narrow use of the term “subjectivation.”¹⁰ This enquiry into some of the ways in which individuals have been, throughout history, called upon to constitute themselves as subjects of discourse, of power and of ethics, eventually led Foucault before the practice of direction of conscience or spiritual guidance:

So I do not think that the idea that one could govern men, or that one did govern men, was a Greek idea. If I have the time and courage I will come back to this problem, either at the end of these lectures or in the next series of lectures, basically around Plato and The Statesman. But, generally speaking, I think we can say that the origin of the idea of a government of men should be sought in the East, in a pre-Christian East first of all, and then in the Christian East, and

8. Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”, p. 315.

9. 1978, since that is the year of *Security, Territory and Population*, where, as we saw, Foucault introduced the notion of subjectivation in the context of a discussion of the origin of pastoral power in early Christianity.

10. The concept of subjectivation was latter broadened to include forms of subjectivation that need not be articulated over the establishment of a particular relationship to certain truths.

in two forms: first, in the idea and organization of a pastoral type of power, and second, in the practice of spiritual direction, the direction of souls.¹¹

Finally, the enquiry into spiritual guidance carried out by Foucault in his teaching at the *Collège de France* since *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* in 1982, up until the *Courage of Truth* in 1984, led him to a concept that became one of the centerpieces of his ethical thought in the last years of his career: the concept of the *care of the self* or *epimeleia heautou*.¹²

7.1.1 *Epimeleia Heautou: The Care of the Self*

In his 1981-1982 lecture series at the *Collège de France: The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Foucault introduces the notion of *epimeleia* as a principle of conduct:

[E]pimeleia, the principle that one must tend to oneself became, generally, the principle of all rational conduct in every form of active life that would in effect obey the principle of moral rationality.¹³

Begin by noting that the idea of a “moral rationality” is to be understood broadly, as rationality insofar as it concerns the general question “how to live?,” rather than in the more

11. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, p. 123 (pp. 127-128).

12. That the notion of *epimeleia* became one of the centerpieces of Foucault’s ethical thought is evident from its being almost omnipresent in Foucault’s discussion of ethical issues. Arguably, its importance stems from its connection to what we may well call the Socratic instauration of ethical enquiry, to the institution, by Socrates, of a new form of relation between subjectivity and truth. See, in this connection, (Michel Foucault. *L’herméneutique du sujet: Cours au Collège de France, 1981-1982*. Cours de Foucault, Michel au Collège de France. Paris: Seuil - Gallimard, 2001, pp. 9-13) and (Michel Foucault. *Le courage de la vérité. Le gouvernement de soi et des autres II: cours au Collège de France. 1984*. Cours de Foucault, Michel au Collège de France. Seuil - Gallimard, 2009, p. 151). The opening lecture of *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* is of particular importance in this regard. The lecture is also of central interest for any attempt to address the question of the motivation behind Foucault’s re-elaboration of the project of the *History of Sexuality* and an account of the shift of emphasis from relations of power between individuals or groups of individuals to the relations of power that individuals may entertain with themselves. Arguably, one of the main factors that lead to this shift of perspective is related to the shift of focus, mentioned by Foucault early in that opening lecture, from the particular example of the history of sexual practices to more general aspects of the question concerning the relation between subjectivity and truth.

13. Foucault, *L’herméneutique du sujet: Cours au Collège de France, 1981-1982*, p. 11.

restrictive sense of “moral” that corresponds to the question of how one is to treat other human beings.

Now, what I want to draw attention to in this passage is the qualification of *epimeleia* as “active.” *Epimeleia* is not the principle of just any life, or any form of rational life, or any form of moral rational life. It is the organizing principle of every form of life that involves an individual’s *active* engagement in living a moral life. This theme, the theme of activity, is a constant in Foucault’s discussions of *epimeleia*. It shows up in the discussions of the *Apology* as an instauration of the *epimeleia heautou* as a principle of life, through the idea that in the *Apology* Socrates’ role in the city is precisely that of awakening his concitizens to a new way of life centered around the care of the self by stinging them into actively engaging in the care of themselves prescribed by the principle of *epimeleia*.^{14,15} It also shows up in Kant’s *What is Enlightenment*, in the idea that the “self-incurred tutelage” from which the Enlightenment is to release us results from our laziness and our lack of resolution.¹⁶ It shows up, of course, in Foucault’s own discussion of the latter.¹⁷ And in connection with our present focus, it shows up in Foucault’s insistence on the opposition between *epimeleia* and negligence, of the idea of *epimeleia* as vigilance as opposed to negligence that runs through *The Courage of Truth*.

The idea that *epimeleia* is the principle not just of any form of rational life, but of any form of *active* moral life, is directly tied with the three features in terms of which Foucault defines a framework for thinking about a life informed by the principle of *epimeleia*. The three main features of that framework are:

— First, the theme of a general attitude, of a certain way of envisaging things, of carrying oneself in the world [de se tenir dans le monde], of carrying out actions,

14. Foucault, *L’herméneutique du sujet: Cours au Collège de France, 1981-1982*, p. 9.

15. See also (Foucault, *Le courage de la vérité. Le gouvernement de soi et des autres II: cours au Collège de France. 1984*, p. 142.).

16. Kant, “Kant: Was ist Aufklärung?”, p. 29.

17. Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”, p. 316.

of relating to others. The *epimeleia heautou* is an attitude: towards oneself, towards others, towards the world;

— Secondly, the *epimeleia heautou* is also a certain way of attention, of looking. To care for oneself implies that one converts one's gaze, and that one displaces it from the exterior [...], from the world, from others, etc., towards 'oneself.' The care of the self implies a certain way to tend to what one thinks and to that which happens within thought. [...]

— Thirdly, the notion of *epimeleia* does not simply designate this general attitude or this form of attention turned towards oneself. The *epimeleia* also designates a certain number of actions, actions that one exerts from oneself to oneself, actions whereby one takes oneself in charge [*se charge de soi-même*], whereby one purifies oneself and whereby one transforms and transfigures oneself. And, from this, a whole series of practices which are, for the most part, as much exercises which will have (in the history of culture, of philosophy, of morality, of western spirituality) a long destiny. These are, for example, the exercises of meditation; these are the techniques of memorization of the past; these are the techniques of an examination of consciousness; these are the techniques of verification of representation as they present themselves to the mind, etc.¹⁸

The idea that *epimeleia* is a *general attitude* towards life, that it involves a constant effort of *attention towards oneself* and a *set of practices* exerted by oneself upon oneself whereby one takes charge of oneself, is the idea of a life at the center of which is the *deliberate* and *active* effort to make the best out of oneself and out of one's life. *Epimeleia*, as a principle, is the principle of every form of active moral life, where the active moral life is precisely a life informed by the three features just mentioned: a *general attitude*, a form of *reflexive attention* or attention toward oneself, and a set of *exercises* or practices directed at self-transformation.

18. Foucault, *L'herméneutique du sujet: Cours au Collège de France, 1981-1982*, pp. 12-13.

These remarks already begin to suggest that there is a certain overlap between the idea of *epimeleia* and the idea of the critical attitude that Foucault suggests is required for the pursuit of freedom. The overlap between the ancient care of the self or *epimeleia*, the critical attitude advocated by Kant in *What is Enlightenment*, and the contemporary pursuit of freedom advocated by Foucault in his appropriation and renewal of Kant's conception of critique is a common theme on Foucault's lectures and interviews in the 1980s.¹⁹

7.1.2 Epimeleia Heautou, Gnothi Seauton

Importantly, in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, the notion of *epimeleia* is introduced through a discussion of its connection with the principle *gnothi seauton*. In the context of this discussion, Foucault argues that the two injunctions are not on a par. Contrary to what one might think, to what we have come to think based on a certain way of reading the *Apology* according to which Socrates believes that the way to pursue the project of *epimeleia*, of the care of oneself is by pursuing knowledge of oneself, the principles *epimeleia heautou* and *gnothi seauton* are not to be identified:

In fact, there is no question of them being on a par. [...] It is much more in a sort of subordination relative to the precept of care of the self that the rule “know thyself” comes to be formulated. The *gnothi seauton* (know thyself) appears [...] in the broader framework of the *epimeleia heautou* (care of oneself) as one of the forms, one of the consequences, as a sort of concrete application, precise and particular, of the general rule: you ought to take care of yourself, you ought to tend to yourself. And it is within this broader framework that the rule “know yourself” appears and is formulated, as though at the summit of that care.²⁰

19. In this connection, see, for instance, *The Ethics of the Care of the Self as a Practice of Freedom* (Foucault, “L'éthique du souci de soi comme pratique de liberté”).

20. Foucault, *L'herméneutique du sujet: Cours au Collège de France, 1981-1982*, p. 6.

Accordingly, one first feature of Foucault's conception of the relationship between the principles *epimeleia heautou* and *gnothi seauton* is that the latter is a specific form that the application of the former may take: obedience to the *gnothi seauton* is not the only form of *care of the self*. Indeed, as we shall see further below, the *aesthetics of existence* is best understood as an alternative way of undertaking the *care of the self*.

A second feature of the relation between *epimeleia* and the *gnothi seauton*, and a consequence of this first one, is that not all instances of an individual's pursuit of knowledge of herself are instances of *epimeleia*. It's not only the case that the care of the self doesn't always take the form of pursuit of knowledge of the self, but conversely, not all forms of pursuit of knowledge of the self are cases of *epimeleia*. *Epimeleia*, as we've seen in the passage just quoted, is not only a principle, it's also a broader framework for thinking about how to live and within which the *gnothi seauton* came to be formulated. It is a framework for conceptualizing the moral dimension of life. *Epimeleia heautou*, as *the principle of any active form of life in accordance with the principle of moral rationality*, is, as Foucault implies in the discussion of his exchanges with Dumézil and Veyne in connection with the meaning of *epimeleia*, the calling, the convocation to actively engage in moral life.²¹ And *epimeleia*, as *a framework for conceptualizing the moral dimension of life*, involves the adoption of an *attitude* or stance, the orientation and focus of one's *attention* on and towards oneself, permanent vigilance of oneself by oneself, and engagement in a set of practices, *exercises* and techniques aimed at making oneself fit to live well.

The principle *gnothi seauton*, as I suggested earlier on in this section, can relate to this framework in various ways. How it relates is a question of the particular historical configuration into which the *epimeleia* and the *gnothi seauton* enter at a particular time in history. There can be a form of *epimeleia* that privileges knowledge and the pursuit of knowledge as the paradigmatic form of care of the self. Such a form of *epimeleia* might

21. Foucault, *Le courage de la vérité. Le gouvernement de soi et des autres II: cours au Collège de France. 1984*, pp. 110-111.

involve intellectual contemplation as the general attitude, attention to oneself *qua* object of knowledge as the form of attention, and techniques of the self designed to render one capable of attaining knowledge of oneself as the exercises. We may regard this as a limit case, a case of placing the principle of *epimeleia* exactly on a par with the principle of *gnothi seauton*, interpreting the former as the injunction to acquire knowledge of one's nature from which to derive a code of moral conduct. That is one limit case. At the opposite end of the spectrum, we may follow Foucault in considering the cynics as engaging in a form of *epimeleia* while completely disregarding, or at least radically and deliberately minimizing, the principle *gnothi seauton*.²² This is not to say that there is no overlap between the cynic life and a life lived for and foremost in accordance with the principle of the *gnothi seauton*. The two extreme versions of *epimeleia* meet halfway, through the notions of *parrhesia* and of a life in the open. Both extremes involve particular incarnations of the relationship between subjectivity and truth. I briefly touch upon these issues in the last section of this chapter.

Epimeleia as the intellectual pursuit of knowledge of oneself; *epimeleia* as a form of care of the self that deliberately disregards or minimizes the importance of knowledge of oneself. In between, a whole spectrum of possible forms of *epimeleia*, and among these various forms, it is possible that the principle *gnothi seauton* be regarded not as a principle that is on a par with the *epimeleia heautou*, not as involving a general attitude, but merely as one of the techniques and practices that are part of that particular form of care of the self. Thus, for instance, the case of Pythagorean morning and evening self-examination, and Pythagorean pursuit of knowledge more generally.²³ On the other hand, it is also possible that there be an attitude towards life, a form of life that is dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge, of knowledge of oneself, of the kind of being that one is, and of one's place in the world,

22. Foucault takes up consideration of the cynics in *The Courage of Truth* precisely insofar as they actively engage in a form of care of the self "without doctrinal mediation." See (Foucault, *Le courage de la vérité. Le gouvernement de soi et des autres II: cours au Collège de France. 1984*, p. 153.).

23. See (Pythagoras. *The golden verses of Pythagoras Translated from the Greek by Nicholas Rowe, Esq;* trans. by Nicholas Rowe. Edinburgh: Alex. M'Caslan, 1769, pp. 8-11), referred to by Foucault in (Foucault, *L'herméneutique du sujet: Cours au Collège de France, 1981-1982*, p. 460).

independently of anything that could be recognized as a form of care of the self.²⁴

Socratic *Exetasis* and the Care of the Self

Foucault describes the object or aim of *exetasis* as accounting for oneself (*rendre raison de soi, didonai logon*). Socratic *exetasis* is the Socratic practice of demanding that his interlocutors account for themselves, that they present the reason behind their way of living, the rationality of themselves,²⁵ much in the way that in the *Apology*, Socrates himself is brought to trial less on the basis of what he refers to as the earlier and later charges than on the basis of his way of living, and much in the way that in addition to defending himself from the early and later charges, he provides a systematic defense of his way of living. The practice of *exetasis* thus has an internal connection to the care of the self. Insofar as to successfully care for oneself is to put oneself in a position to successfully account for oneself, the practice of *exetasis* works both as a test of one's success in caring for oneself, and as the means to identify the aspects of one's life towards which one should direct one's ethical attention.²⁶

7.1.3 *The Aesthetics of Existence in The Courage of Truth*

The notion of the “aesthetics of existence” is first introduced in *The Courage of Truth* as one of “two lines of development of Socratic veridiction throughout Western philosophy” corresponding to one of “two different developments in the history of Western philosophy.”²⁷ These two lines of development, Foucault explains, correspond to two different modes of

24. In this connection, see Foucault's discussion, in the opening lecture of *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, of what in the context of that lecture he refers to as *philosophy* and *spirituality* (Foucault, *L'herméneutique du sujet: Cours au Collège de France, 1981-1982*, pp. 16-20).

25. Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984*, p. 161.

26. Another important dimension of *exetasis* and of Foucault's idea of the care of the self which I will not develop here lies in its dialogical dimension. The care of the self ineliminably requires being tested by others.

27. Foucault, *Le courage de la vérité. Le gouvernement de soi et des autres II: cours au Collège de France. 1984*, p. 149.

accounting for oneself in answering to the challenge posed by Socratic cross-examination (*exetasis*). These two modes of accounting for oneself are portrayed, respectively, in the *Alcibiades* and in the *Laches*. To the *Alcibiades* corresponds a way of meeting the Socratic challenge of accounting for oneself that Foucault refers to as the *metaphysics of the soul*; to the *Laches* corresponds what he refers to as the *aesthetics of existence*²⁸.

[T]he *Alcibiades*, starting from the principle of the need to give an account of oneself, proceeds to the discovery and establishment of oneself as a reality ontologically distinct from the body. And this reality ontologically distinct from the body is explicitly designated as the soul (*psukhe*). [...] And this establishment of the *psukhe*, as a reality ontologically distinct from the body that had to be looked after, was correlative with a mode of knowledge of self which had the form of the soul's contemplation of itself and its recognition of its mode of being. [...] Thus, the establishment of oneself as a reality ontologically distinct from the body, in the form of a *psukhe* which possesses the possibility and ethical duty of contemplating itself, gives rise to a mode of truth-telling, of veridiction, the role and end of which is to lead the soul back to its mode of being and its world. The development of the Socratic veridiction we see in the *Alcibiades*, starting from this fundamental recurrent, and common theme of the care of the self, designates, and up to a point marks out the future site of metaphysical discourse, which will have to speak to man of his being and what in the way of ethics and rules of conduct follows from this ontological foundation of its being.²⁹

For our purposes, the central feature of this passage is that Foucault effectively identifies the metaphysics of the soul with a particular form of link between subjectivity and truth: the metaphysics of the soul is a particular form of answering the Socratic challenge to account

28. Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984*, pp. 160-162.

29. Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984*, pp. 159-160.

for oneself. It involves coming to think of oneself as a soul which, trapped in a body from which it is distinct, has the ethical duty to contemplate itself in order to be able to lead itself back to its original mode of being.

In terms of Foucault's ethical framework for the historical study of forms of moral conduct, we may think of the metaphysics of the soul as a certain form of the relation to the self, as a certain form of subjectivation or self-constitution. Its ethical substance is the soul as an ontologically distinct entity from the body; its goal, its ethical *telos*, is the soul's return to its original mode of being; the techniques whereby it seeks to realize this *telos* are structured around the individual's ontological contemplation of itself and the production of metaphysical discourse about itself as a soul; finally, the mode of subjection to ethical norms characteristic of this form of relation to the self consists in the individual's acknowledgement of the truths about its being that result from those contemplative and 'veridictional' practices, and the recognition and acceptance of their practical implications.

This last aspect of the metaphysics of the soul, the mode of subjection characteristic of it, is of particular importance for our purposes. The metaphysics of the soul is a form of ethical self-constitution within which the binding force of ethical norms over individuals is (taken to be) rooted in metaphysical facts about their being: find out the truth of what you are, and you will have found the answer to the question 'how to live?'

The aesthetics of existence is a different way of meeting the Socratic challenge of accounting for oneself, and corresponds to a different form of relation of the self to itself, a different form of subjectivation or self-constitution:

In the *Laches*, on the other hand [...], the establishment of oneself no longer takes place in the mode of discovery of the *psukhe* as a reality ontologically distinct from the body, but as a way of being and doing—this is explicitly stated in the *Laches*—of which one has to give an account throughout one's life. What has to be accounted for, and the very objective of this activity of accounting, is how one lives and has lived. That is to say, giving an account of oneself, which in the

Alcibiades led us to the ontologically distinct reality of the *psukhe*, leads us to something quite different in the *Laches*. It leads us to *bios*, to life, to existence and the way in which one conducts this existence. This establishment of oneself, no longer as *psukhe* but as *bios*, no longer as soul but as life and mode of life, is correlative to a mode of knowledge of self which, of course, in a way fundamentally falls under the principle “know yourself,” which is evoked so frequently in the *Alcibiades*. But this *gnothi seauton*, this self-knowledge, which applies in the *Laches* as well as in the *Alcibiades*, which is valid both for the discovery of the soul and for bring the problem of the *bios* to light, obviously has a very different form when giving an account of oneself is indexed to the problem of the *bios* (life) rather than to the discovery of the soul as an ontologically distinct reality. This self-knowledge, which in the *Laches* is evoked more than is employed, does not take the form of the soul’s contemplation of itself in the mirror of its divinity. This mode of self knowledge takes the form—as we noted the words are in the *Laches*—of the test, of examination, and also of exercise concerning the way in which one conducts oneself. And it gives rise to a mode of truth-telling which does not mark out the site of a possible metaphysical discourse, but a mode of truth-telling whose role and end is to give some kind of form to this *bios* (this life, this existence).³⁰

So, in one case we have a mode of giving an account of oneself which leads to the *psukhe* and which, in doing this, marks out the site of a metaphysical discourse. In the other case, we have a giving an account of oneself, an “accounting for oneself,” which is directed towards *bios* as existence, towards a mode of existence which is to be examined and tested throughout its life. Why? So as to be able to

30. Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984*, pp. 160.

give it a certain form, thanks to a certain kind of true discourse. This discourse which gives an account of oneself must define the visible figure that humans must give to their life. [...] ³¹

This alternative form of self-constitution, the aesthetics of existence, establishes a different type of relationship between subjectivity and truth, and it involves a different mode of subjectivation or self-constitution. Its ethical substance is no longer a metaphysical soul, but one's life and existence, one's way of living; its goal is not to return one's soul to its original mode of being, but to give one's life a certain beautiful form (I shall return to this momentarily); its way of pursuing that goal is not through the ontological contemplation of the truth about one's being, but the constant practice and testing one's success in giving one's life a certain form; finally, its mode of subjection is not the intellectual recognition of truths about one's being and of their practical implications, but the aesthetic recognition of the distinctively ethical admirability of a certain form of living, to the distinctively ethical beauty that certain ways of living can have.

Thus, in the case of the metaphysics of the soul, and in the case of the aesthetics of existence, there is a different relation between subjectivity and truth. In the aesthetics of existence, the individual is not a subject whose form is determined by metaphysical truths about its being, whose contemplative recognition of those truths constitutes it as the kind of subject that it is. The individual is rather a subject whose form is determined by truths about how it effectively lives and has lived, whose adoption of a certain way of life constitutes it as the kind of subject that it is, and whose adoption of that way of life thereby determines also the truth about the type of subject that it is: tell the truth about how you live and have lived, and you will have told the truth about what you are; tell the truth about what kind of life you will want to have lived and remembered come the end of your life, and you will have told the true answer to the question: how should I live?

31. Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984*, p. 161.

Foucault partially explains the motivation behind his discussion of the idea of the aesthetics of existence in *The Courage of Truth* as follows:

I have emphasized the closeness and fundamental divergence that can be seen in the dialogues of the *Laches* and the *Alcibiades* for the following reason. I have tried in this way to uncover, at least in some of its most ancient and archaic features, the history of what could be called, in a word, the aesthetics of existence. That is to say, not only, not so much for the moment, the different form the arts of existence may have taken, which would obviously require a whole series of particular studies. But I wanted to grasp, I wanted to try to show you, and myself, how, through the emergence and foundation of Socratic *parrhesia*, existence (*bios*) was constituted in Greek thought as an aesthetic object, as an object of aesthetic elaboration and perception: *bios* as a beautiful work. [...] There is, of course, a history of the metaphysics of the soul. There is also—which is, up to a point, the other side and also alternative—a history of the stylistics of existence, a history of life as possible beauty.³²

Two features of this passage are noteworthy. First, that Foucault effectively introduces a second use of the notion of the aesthetics of existence. In addition to the idea the aesthetics of existence as a form of the care of the self and of meeting the Socratic challenge of accounting for oneself, the aesthetics of existence is here presented as a possible object of historical enquiry. The second feature of the passage is in the clause interpolated in the last statement. The history of the aesthetics of existence is here presented as the other side and also the alternative of the metaphysics of the soul. Not the history of the attempts to produce theories of human being from which it would be possible to derive codes of behavior, but the history of the practices whereby individuals have sought to lend their lives an ethically praiseworthy form. The history of the aesthetics of existence as a different history of ethical

32. Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984*, p. 162.

self-constitution, suggesting that perhaps we may think of the aesthetics of existence as the other side of and also the alternative to the metaphysics of the soul as a form of care of the self.

Foucault elaborates on his conception of the relationship between the metaphysics of the soul and the aesthetics of existence:

In no way am I claiming—and this is the second remark I would like to make—that there was something like an incompatibility or insurmountable contradiction between the themes of ontology of the soul and aesthetics of existence. On the contrary, we can even say that these two themes were really and constantly linked. In practice, there is hardly any ontology of the soul which has not in fact been linked to the definition or requirement of some kind of style of life, of some kind of form of existence. Just as hardly any style of existence, any form of life was worked out and developed without more or less explicitly referring to something like a metaphysics of the soul. But I would like to emphasize that this relationship between metaphysics of the soul and stylistics of existence is never a necessary or unique relationship.

In other words, the stylistics of [existence³³ could never be] the projection, application, consequence, or putting into practice of something like a metaphysics of the soul. The relations between the two are flexible and variable. The relationship exists, but it is sufficiently flexible for it to be possible to find a whole series of completely different styles of existence linked to one and the same metaphysics of the soul.³⁴

On Foucault's conception, the aesthetics of existence and the metaphysics of the soul are not mutually incompatible. On the contrary, if we think of these notions at their most

33. Translator's note: "M.F. says: the soul."

34. Foucault, *Le courage de la vérité. Le gouvernement de soi et des autres II: cours au Collège de France. 1984*, pp. 163-164.

abstract, as corresponding to ethical doctrine on the one hand, and ethical practices oriented toward the attainment of an ethical ideal on the other, the metaphysics of the soul and the aesthetics of existence stand, have historically stood, on a relationship of complementarity.

But if the aesthetics of existence does not stand in opposition to the metaphysics of the soul, if both can be seen as complementary modes of engagement with the project of the care of the self, why Foucault's insistence, towards the end of his career, on the view that the aesthetics of existence provided the resources for a novel approach to ethics, one that would be best suited of our lives? And why the claim, intended to be the closing statement of the lecture at the *Collège de France* that we've been considering in the last section, that at the heart of Western culture lies the difficulty of understanding the link between the will to truth and the aesthetics of existence?

7.2 The Aesthetics of Existence within Foucault's Ethical Views

The answer of the preceding question is predictably complex. Towards the end of the last section, we saw that the notion of the aesthetics of existence is not only the notion of a form of care of the self, but that it also offers a vantage point from which the history of morality can be undertaken. In order to account for Foucault's interest in the aesthetics of existence as the form of care of the self most suitable for the present, I shall consider more closely Foucault's historical work in the late seventies and early eighties, emphasizing two aspects of that work: a history of morality as "a history of the stylistics of existence"^{35,36}, and as a history of the relationship between subjectivity, truth, and the constitution of individuals into ethical subjects.³⁷

35. Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984*, p. 162.

36. Cited just above.

37. Foucault, "An Aesthetics of Existence", p. 48.

7.2.1 *An Overview of the History of Morality*

A (very rough) outline of Foucault's history of morality, or rather, of one of its main turning points, is to be found in *An Aesthetics of Existence*, an interview that took place in 1984, and which is of particular significance since it is in the context that, as we saw, Foucault said that the need for an aesthetics of existence corresponded to the disappearance of morality as obedience to a system of rules.

With Christianity, there occurred a slow, gradual shift in relation to the moralities of Antiquity, which were essentially a practice, a style of liberty. Of course, there had also been certain norms of behavior that governed each individual's behavior. But the will to be a moral subject and the search for an ethics of existence were, in Antiquity, mainly an attempt to affirm one's liberty and to give to one's own life a certain form in which one could recognize oneself, be recognized by others, and which even posterity might take as an example.

This elaboration of one's own life as a personal work of art, even if it obeyed certain collective canons, was at the centre, it seems to me, of moral experience, of the will to morality in Antiquity, whereas in Christianity, with the religion of the text, the idea of the will of God, the principle of obedience, morality took on increasingly the form of a code of rules (only certain ascetic practices were more bound up with the exercise of personal liberty).

From Antiquity to Christianity, we pass from a morality that was essentially the search for a personal ethics to a morality as obedience to a system of rules. And if I was interested in Antiquity it was because, for a whole series of reasons, the idea of a morality as obedience to a code of rules is now disappearing, has already disappeared. And to this absence of morality corresponds, must correspond, the search for an aesthetics of existence.³⁸

38. Foucault, "An Aesthetics of Existence", p. 49.

This passage is richer than it may initially seem. Foucault identifies a gradual but important shift between Ancient and Christian moralities. But note, first, that he begins to draw the contrast by indicating that (i) the *telos* of Ancient moral practice was the affirmation of one's freedom, and that the affirmation of one's freedom was (ii) sought by means of a form of care of the self that corresponds to the aesthetics of existence. Thus we have, in this text, an identification of the aesthetics of existence as a form of care of the self oriented towards the affirmation of one's freedom. That is the first point: historically, the ethical telos of the aesthetics of experience was the affirmation of one's freedom, the constitution of oneself as an autonomous agent.

Second, note Foucault's explicit statement that his interest in the notion of an aesthetics of existence springs from his conviction that the notion of morality as *obedience* to a code is disappearing, and that to this absence of morality as obedience may and must correspond an aesthetics of existence. It is because a conception that centers around the notion of obedience is disappearing. And here, let me pause and highlight, currently as an aside, though this will become central in our understanding of the notion of the aesthetics of existence, that modulo the correspondence between the concepts of obedience and of self-incurred tutelage, there is a partial overlap between this diagnosis of the present, and Kant's diagnosis of his present in the opening paragraphs of *What is Enlightenment*, in the idea that the time of the Enlightenment present is the time for people to release themselves from their self-incurred tutelage.³⁹ Furthermore, there is a complete overlap between this diagnosis of the present and Foucault's diagnosis of his and our present in the discussion and renewal of Kant's essay in his own eponymous article. In Kant's present, from Kant's perspective: no longer self-incurred tutelage. In Foucault's (and our) present, from Foucault's perspective: no longer

39. All the more striking when we take into account the examples of self-incurred tutelage mentioned by Kant: the "pastor who has a conscience for me, [the] physician who decides my diet," and when we considers that the Christian pastorate and ancient dietetics where two of the central axes of historical research into ethics in Foucault's historical work from 1978 (the year where he delivered a lecture on Kant's *What is Enlightenment: What is Critique?* (Michel Foucault. "What is Critique?" In: *The Politics of Truth*. MIT Press, 2007. Chap. 2, pp. 41-82))

self-incurred tutelage, not even in the form of Christian obedience. Instead, an aesthetics of existence oriented towards the affirmation of one's freedom.⁴⁰

Third, and finally, consider closely what Foucault identifies as the pivotal points of the shift to Christian morality: the religion of the text, the will of God,⁴¹ the principle of obedience—jointly issuing in a conception of morality as a code of rules. Now, the phrase “the religion of the text” is a likely allusion to the etymology of the word found in Benveniste's *Vocabulaire des Institutions* and taken up later (after Foucault's death) by Derrida in *Foi et Savoir*.⁴²

According to Benveniste, there is has been a long-standing debate between two etymologies of the word “religion.” On the one hand, Cicero's etymology, which traces the latin “*religio*” to the verb “*legere*” to collect, to bring together. There is, on the other hand, the sense due to Lactantius and Tertullian, who explain religion by “*ligare*,” to bind.⁴³ Towards the end of his discussion of the two etymologies, Benveniste concludes:

Roman “*religio*” is, from its origin, essentially subjective. It is not fortuitous that

40. Here I have highlighted the parallel. In both cases, the need to abandon self-incurred tutelage and render oneself autonomous through the adequate exercise of reason. But there is, as we shall see, a profound difference in their conceptions of autonomy, of the the aim of critique, and of the function of ethical norms. In Kant, autonomy of the rational will from any non-rational determinations, attained through a critique of practical reason aimed at drawing the limits of the space of rational-moral action, by identifying the rational principles that ought to constrain the will. In Foucault, autonomy as the affirmation of the individual's freedom, attained through the critical scrutiny of any putative practical constraint aimed at displaying the limits of the necessary, and through the freely undertaken commitment to comply with norms of conduct that will issue in a free, open and autonomous life. In the case of Kant, autonomy is attained by constraining the will to the rational norms identified through critical work. In the case of Foucault, autonomy is attained by lifting seemingly necessary constraints on the will through critical work that exposes their non-necessity.

41. Note that we already encountered the themes of acceptance of a truth and correlative forms of bonds between wills in Christianity within the context of the analysis of the concept of subjectivation (see Chapter 4, p. 147 et seq. above).

42. Derrida writes:

Dans la tradition occidentale, si l'on doit se comporter d'une certaine façon, c'est parce que Dieu commande que l'on le fasse. C'est la vision religieuse du monde, au double sens étymologique de religion. (Jaques Derrida and M. Wieviorka. *Foi et savoir: suivi de Le siècle et le pardon*. Collection Points: Série essais. Éditions du Seuil, 1996, 2000, pp. 51-52)

43. Émile Benveniste and J. Lallot. *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes: Pouvoir, droit, religion*. Collection Le sens commun. Éditions de Minuit, 1969, p. 268.

it is only among Christian that the explanation of “*religio*” by “*religare*” makes an appearance. Lactantius insists: “[...] The term “*religio*” has been taken from the bond [*lien*] of piety, because God binds [*links*] himself to man and binds him through piety.” This is because the content of “*religio*” itself has changed. For a Christian, what characterizes the new faith, relative to pagan cults, is the bond of faith, this dependence of the person of faith on God, this *obligation* in the proper sense of the term. The concept of “*religio*” is remodeled on the idea that man then forms of his relationship to God, a whole different idea from the old roman “*religio*” and which prepares the modern sense of the term. That is the essence of the history and the origin of the word “*religio*,” as it is taught both by the uses and by the form of the word.⁴⁴

In Benveniste’s text, what is characteristic of Christian uses of “religion” is the idea of a bond of dependence between the will of God and the will of individuals, a bond that establishes a relationship of dependence between one and the other, and a bond of dependence which is at the same time a bond of obligation. As I have mentioned—this was the third point about the passage from *An Aesthetics of Existence*—in Foucault’s description of the conception of the distinctiveness of Christian morality, these same themes are taken up: religion of the text, a bond of acceptance with a set of dogmas and doctrines that establishes a bond between the will of the individual and the will of God, and thereby establishes a set of obligations: Acceptance of a truth, subjection of will, bond of obligation.

Foucault’s characterization of Christian morality, his emphasis on the notion of obedience as a mode of subjection (i.e. as the kind of relation between the ethical subject and the ethical norms that she takes herself to have to comply with), of the subordination of one’s will to the will of God, and of the role of the acceptance of truths in the establishment of this form of morality are further illuminated when considered in relation to some of Foucault’s remarks

44. Benveniste and Lallot, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes: Pouvoir, droit, religion*, p. 272.

concerning pastoral power in *Security, Territory and Population* (the series of lectures within which, as we saw, Foucault introduced the notion of subjectivation):

[T]he Christian pastorate is also absolutely innovative in establishing a structure, a technique of, at once, power, investigation, self-examination, and the examination of others, by which a certain secret inner truth of the hidden soul, becomes the element through which the pastor's power is exercised, by which obedience is practiced, by which the relationship of complete obedience is assured [...]. It is not salvation, the law, and the truth, but these new relationships of merits and faults, absolute obedience, and the production of hidden truths, which constitute, I think, what is essential and the originality and specificity of Christianity.⁴⁵

In fact, throughout the lecture in question, Foucault draws a contrast between Christian pastoral power and Greco-Roman direction of conscience. Within this context, one of the central contrasting points lies precisely in the nature of the bond of obligation in these two forms of spiritual guidance. The goal of Greco-Roman direction of conscience is, according to Foucault, the mastery of oneself, and if the disciple is to obey the master, this obedience is temporary, and only for the sake of learning how to become his own master.⁴⁶ The proximal goal of Christian obedience is the mortification of the will, its overarching goal is “the definitive renouncement to one's own will [...], that there be no other will than the will not to have a will.”⁴⁷

Three themes, therefore, of Christian morality highlighted by Foucault: (i) a bond of obedience between (2) two wills such that one is dependent on the other, and which bond (3) established through a particular bond to truth, through the particular acceptance and production of various truths. In order to bring them more clearly into view, let's now turn

45. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, p. 183.

46. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, p. 180.

47. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, p. 181.

to a brief—and admittedly partial overview—of Foucault’s history of morality as a history of the relationship between subjectivity and truth.

7.2.2 *Subjectivity and Truth*

In a number of texts from the 1980s, including *An Aesthetics of Existence*,⁴⁸ Foucault described his intellectual project as an enquiry into the relationship between subjectivity and truth, or an enquiry into the ways in which individuals come to be constituted into subjects by establishing a certain relationship with the truth.⁴⁹

This way of thinking about Foucault’s project is helpful for understanding Foucault’s interest in the notion of the aesthetics of existence. For that interest was rooted, as we will see, in Foucault’s conviction that the aesthetics of existence offered a way of re-conceiving the relationship between subjectivity and truth, and of re-conceiving it in such a way as to open up the possibility for an individual’s constitution of herself into an *autonomous* subject, into the kind of subject that does not obey, but affirms her independence, into the kind of subject who is not bound to moral norms by a bond of obligation grounded in the truth-mediated subjection of her will to the will of another, or by her acceptance of a set of metaphysical truths about herself on which moral norms would be grounded, but into a subject who is bound by moral norms by her will to give her life and ethically beautiful form through the mastery of herself.

Early on in *Subjectivity and Truth*, the series of lectures delivered at the *Collège de France* in 1981, Foucault described the conception of subjectivity at work in his approach to the enquiry into the relationship of subjectivity and truth in the following terms:

Subjectivity is conceived as that which constitutes itself and transforms itself in

48. “I don’t think there is a great difference between these books [the last two volumes of *The History of Sexuality*] and the earlier ones. [...] I have tried to analyze how areas such as madness, sexuality, and delinquency may enter into a certain play of the truth, and also how, through this insertion of human practice, of behavior, in the play of truth, the subject himself is affected. That was the problem of the history of madness, of sexuality” (Foucault, “An Aesthetics of Existence”, p. 48).

49. See also, for instance, Foucault’s entry in the *Dictionnaire des Philosophes* (Foucault, “Foucault”).

relation to its own truth. No theory of the subject independent of the relationship to truth.^{50,51}

And he described the implications of his distinctive approach to the study of relations between subjectivity and truth in connection to the concept of truth:

[T]ruth [...] is not defined through a certain content of knowledge that one could consider as universally valid, it is not even defined through a formal and universal criterion. Truth is conceived essentially as a system of obligations, independently of the fact that from one point of view or another, it can be conceived as true or as false. Truth is before anything a system of obligations. It is therefore completely different that what is, at a given moment, taken to be true, isn't considered true at a different moment. [...] What is important, in this question of truth, is that a certain number of things effectively pass as true, and that the subject must produce them herself, or accept them, or submit to them. It is therefore truth as a bond, truth as obligation, truth as politic [comme politique], and not truth as a content of knowledge or as formal structure of knowledge that has been and will be at issue.^{52,53}

50. La subjectivité est conçue comme ce qui se constitue et se transforme par rapport à sa propre vérité. Pas de théorie du sujet indépendante du rapport à la vérité (Michel Foucault. *Subjectivité et vérité: cours au Collège de France (1980-1981)*. Cours de Foucault, Michel au Collège de France. Seuil - Gallimard, 2014, p. 15).

51. Foucault, *Subjectivité et vérité: cours au Collège de France (1980-1981)*, p. 15.

52. [L]a vérité [...] n'est pas définie par un certain contenu de connaissance que l'on pourrait considérer comme universellement valable, elle n'est même pas définie par un certain critère formel et universel. La vérité est conçue essentiellement comme un système d'obligations, indépendamment du fait que, de tel ou tel point de vue, on peut la considérer comme vraie ou pas. La vérité est avant tout un système d'obligations. Il est tout à fait indifférent par conséquent que ce qui est, à un moment donné, considéré comme vrai ne le soit plus à un autre. [...] L'important, dans cette question de la vérité, c'est qu'un certain nombre de choses passent effectivement pour vraies, et que le sujet doit les produire lui-même, ou les accepter, ou s'y soumettre. C'est de donc la vérité comme lien, de la vérité comme obligation, de la vérité aussi comme politique, et non pas de la vérité comme contenu de connaissance ni comme structure formelle de la connaissance, qu'il a été et qu'il sera question (Foucault, *Subjectivité et vérité: cours au Collège de France (1980-1981)*, p. 15) It is of course important, in considering this passage, to bear in mind that Foucault' is not providing a definition of truth, but is rather characterizing the perspective on truth at work in his project of a history of the different configurations of the relationship between subjectivity and truth.

53. Foucault, *Subjectivité et vérité: cours au Collège de France (1980-1981)*, p. 15.

Foucault's enquiry into the relationship between subjectivity and truth in the early 1980s was thus an enquiry into the ways in which truth works as a system of obligations that constitute individuals into the kinds of subjects that they are. It was a historical enquiry into different historical forms of relationships between individuals and truth, and into the corresponding forms of subjectivity that the establishment of those relationships gave rise to. And within this enquiry, Foucault was particularly interested in "the way a human being turns him- or herself into a subject,"⁵⁴ in the interplay between the way individuals are governed, "the exercise of power," and the ways in which individuals can, by playing an active role in the constitution of themselves as subjects, constitute themselves as subjects of the exercise of power.

Why, in what way, in a society like ours, does there exist such a deep bond between the exercise of power and the obligation, for individuals, to turn themselves into essential agents of the procedures of the manifestation of truth, of the procedures of alethurgy that are necessary for power? What relationship is there between the fact of being a subject in a relation of power and a subject through whom, for whom and about whom truth is manifested? What is that double meaning of the word "subject," subject of a power relation, subject of a manifestation of truth?⁵⁵

Thus, let me insist, for it is important, Foucault's interest in the relationship between subjectivity and truth centered around the interest in how by entering into certain relationships with certain kinds of truth, individuals become subjects over whom particular forms of power is exercised, *even*, this is the key point, where the individuals in question play an active role in the establishment of those relationships with the truth.

Finally, a central feature of Foucault's enquiry into the relationship between subjectivity and truth is that it took the form of a history of the stylistics of existence rather than of

54. Foucault, "The Subject and Power", p. 327.

55. Foucault, *Du gouvernement des vivants: cours au Collège de France 1979-1980*, p. 79.

a history of the metaphysics of the soul.⁵⁶ It focused, that is, on the study of practices rather than on the study of bodies of doctrine,⁵⁷ practices surrounding the acceptance and production of truths, ‘acts of truth’ and ‘acts of veridiction’ whose various forms corresponded to so many forms of relation between subjectivity and truth.⁵⁸

It is within this context, through the pursuit of this line of enquiry, through the study of the set of practices whereby individuals come to be the agents of the manifestation of truth, and in becoming agents of the manifestation of truth, become subjects of power, subject *to* power, that Foucault came to identify the history of forms of subjectivation in Western culture as the history of the development of ever more sophisticated technologies of government, technologies of government that relied on a metaphysics of the soul, technologies of government that were in any case closer to a metaphysics of the soul than to an aesthetics of existence insofar as they relied on the individual’s self-constitution as a subject who had an ethical duty⁵⁹ to discover and utter truths about himself, which truths work at the same time as enclaves for the exercise of power, as systems of obligation to behave in certain ways.

7.2.3 *Truth, Obligation, and the Binding Force of Ethical Norms*

How did the history of morality as a history of acts whereby individuals come to establish a certain relationship between truth and themselves, and thereby constitute themselves as subjects of power, lead Foucault to identify the slow and accidental shift from Greco-Roman to Christian morality as a central turning point in the history of Western morality? Why did

56. See p. 237 above.

57. See, for instance, (Foucault, *Du gouvernement des vivants: cours au Collège de France 1979-1980*, p. 111). The stakes and motivation of this approach, as well as we may think of as the rudiments of the general conception of the form of the relationship between subjectivity and truth that undergirds the notion of acts of truths developed in the earlier lectures in the series, and in particular on the lectures of January 30th and February 60th 1980 (Foucault, *Du gouvernement des vivants: cours au Collège de France 1979-1980*, pp. 71-110)

58. For a definition of the notion of ‘acts of truth’ see also (Foucault, *Du gouvernement des vivants: cours au Collège de France 1979-1980*, p. 79).

59. See (Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984*, pp. 159-160), cited above (p. 233).

Foucault think that the Christian morality of obedience was in the process of disappearing or had already disappeared? Why did he think that the aesthetics of existence must respond to the disappearance of a morality of obedience?

The aesthetics of existence and the metaphysics of the soul are, as we saw, two forms of care of the self that involve two substantively different forms of ethical self-constitution: constitution as a soul that is ontological distinct of the body through the contemplation of one's being, and a subsequent effort to return one's being to its original form; constitution of one's life or existence as an ethically beautiful object, as an *admirable*, *memorable*, *praiseworthy* life. The shift from Greco-Roman toward Christian morality seemed of particular significance to Foucault precisely insofar as it could be understood as a shift towards a morality that was closer to a metaphysics of the soul, where the force of norms over individuals was understood as rooted in metaphysical truths about those individuals (both about the kind of entities that they are, and eventually, through the emergence of pastoral power and in particular, of confessional practices, about the particular individuals that they are).⁶⁰

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As might be expected, the answer to the second question—why did Foucault think

60. Thus, after introducing the distinction between the metaphysics of the soul and the aesthetics of existence in the lecture discussed above, Foucault explains that while there were a certain number of Christian practices whose purpose was to lend one's life a certain ethically beautiful form in Christianity, they were all linked to a largely constant metaphysics:

[T]he stylistics of [existence* could never be] the projection, application, consequence, or putting into practice of something like a metaphysics of the soul. The relations between the two are flexible and variable. The relationship exists, but it is sufficiently flexible for it to be possible to find a whole series of completely different styles of existence linked to one and the same metaphysics of the soul. While accepting, on the basis of a schematic and entirely summary view, that there is a certain degree of constancy in the metaphysics of the soul specific to Christianity, you know very well that Christianity developed very different styles of existence, both simultaneously and successively, within the framework of this metaphysics. Several simultaneous modes of existence have been defined within Christianity. The ascetic's life is not everyone's life; the lay person's life is not the same as that of the cleric; the life of the monk or the regular clergy is not the same as that of the secular clergy, and so on. (Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984*, p. 164)

that the Christian morality of obedience was in the process of disappearing or had already disappeared?—does not have the form of a causal-historical explanation that Foucault would have endorsed as to why a certain form of experience of ethical life is fading away. But the following remarks can help bring into view, if not Foucault’s view as to *why* the idea of morality as obedience to a code of rules is disappearing, the motivation behind his conviction that such a form of morality is and has been for a long time disappearing.

The first two observations are reminders. First, toward the end of Chapter 4,⁶¹ we saw that on Foucault’s view, there have been, historically, different ways for individuals to subordinate their will to the will of others. And we saw that one of the distinctive features of the kind of subordination of an individual’s will to the will of his master characteristic of Greco-Roman spiritual guidance was that it involved “no yielding of sovereignty [...], no renunciation by the individual to her own will.”^{62,63}

Second, we also saw that Foucault regarded professions of faith and confession, two paradigmatic acts of truth, as two substantively different practices, corresponding to two different forms of relation of an individual to the truth. Professions of faith consist in expressions of acceptance of “revealed and intangible truths.” In the case of confession, by contrast, the subject expresses truths about her innermost self, whose source is her innermost self, and which have been extracted and could have only been extracted by herself, through the indefinite exploration of her individual secrets.

61. See 4.3.4, pp. 147 et seq. above.

62. Foucault, *Du gouvernement des vivants: cours au Collège de France 1979-1980*, p. 225.

63. The theme was taken up again the series of lecture of the following year:

First, [...] Philodemus shows well that in the Epicurean school, it was absolutely necessary that each person have a *hêgemôn*: a guide, a director that secured his individual guidance. Secondly, still according to this text by Philodemus, this individual guidance was organized around of, or had to obey, two principles. This individual guidance could not be done without there being between the two partners, the guide and the guided, an intense affective relation, a relation of friendship. And this direction implied a certain quality, a certain, to be honest, “way of living”, I would say: a certain “ethics of discourse” that I would like to analyze in the next hour of this lecture and that is called, precisely, *parrhesia*. (Foucault, *L’herméneutique du sujet: Cours au Collège de France, 1981-1982*, p. 132)

And now, as a third observation, note that a frequent theme in Foucault's discussion of pastoral power is that it is a form of power that secures the obedience of each individual to the pastor by reference to her own individual salvation.⁶⁴ The will of the pastor and the will of the individual coincide in a single goal, but the attainment of that goal requires that a bond of dependence be established between the individual and the pastor through a principle of obedience that prescribes the renunciation of the will:

[I]f therefore [pastoral] obedience has a goal, it is a state of obedience defined by renunciation, the definite renunciation to one's individual will. The goal of obedience is the mortification of one's will, is to make it so that one's will as one's individual will be dead, is to make it so that there be no other will that not to have a will.⁶⁵

Keeping these three observations in mind, it is not surprising than in a historical context like ours, where epistemic rationality demands that we reject intangible and revealed truths (in order to avoid stepping beyond the limits of rational knowledge), the principle of obedience has lost its metaphysical anchoring point in the promise of salvation.

This, it is worth noting, is the point meant to be captured in the traditional form of the nihilist slogan: "God is dead, everything is permitted." And we can now understand one of the motivations for Foucault's reformulation of that slogan. Not the death of God in particular, and not the consequence that everything is permitted. But the absence of metaphysical truths that serve to ground a morality obedience to a moral code, and the consequence that such a morality is disappearing, has already disappeared. And in the face of the disappearance of this traditional form of morality, not the defeatist and ultimately incoherent expression of anxiety: 'everything is permitted,' but a challenge to find a new answer to the question: how to live? And new way of exercising a freedom such that

64. See, for instance, (Foucault, *Du gouvernement des vivants: cours au Collège de France 1979-1980*, pp.171 et seq.) and (Foucault, "The Subject and Power", pp. 332-333)

65. Foucault, *Sécurité, territoire, population: cours au Collège de France, 1977-1978*, p. 181.

normative constraints are not external and prohibitive, but internal and productive.

There is more. In addition to this shift in Western epistemic rationality, there was another important shift in the history of morality. Pastoral power incorporated and substantively transformed the ancient practice of spiritual guidance. And part of the efficacy of pastoral power stemmed from its deployment of a mode of subjection of an individual's will to the will of another analogous to the model at work in ancient spiritual guidance. Not exactly a surrendering of one's will to the will of another, but a fusion of the wills insofar as the two wills coincided in a single *telos*, namely the salvation of the disciple's soul. In pastoral power, obedience to the pastor is required not only because that is God's will, and God is creator, but also because obedience to the pastor guarantees the goal that one is in any case internally and freely committed to pursue: one's own salvation.

We can think of this shift within the history of Christianity as a gradual shift towards a certain form of internalism about reasons for acting morally. To comply with moral norms not only because the creator wants one to, but because one recognizes the necessity of complying with them for the pursuit of an end that one is freely committed to undertake, to comply with norms not only for reasons that another imposes upon us (be it by force, or on the basis of an authority that is 'grounded' in his metaphysical relation to us—the bond of creator to creature—but for a distinctive type of internal reason. It is to comply with norms because one recognizes not only the rationality of *obeying* the norm—given the prescriber's authority—but because one recognizes *the content of the norm* itself as rational.

In this movement within Christian morality towards a new form of rationality Foucault also identified the Reformation as a shift towards that same form of internalism:

Protestantism, what was it in the end, if not a certain way of reappropriating the dogmatic content of the act of faith as adhesion to a dogmatic content, and to put it at the service of a form of subjectivity that allows the individual to discover within herself, in the depth of herself, according to the law and the testimony

of her conscience, that same content? In other words, it is as an operator of truth, as actor, as witness and as object of the act of truth that the [protestant] individual is going to discover in the depths of herself what must be the law of her belief and of her act of faith.⁶⁶

Note, in this connection, once again, the closeness of these issues with Kant's idea of tutelage in *What is Enlightenment*, and in this particular respect, Kant's remarks with respect to Frederick's authority, which mark a reversal of the conception of authority. For what Kant suggests in the text is, effectively, that Frederick must be obeyed because he is a prince, but that if he is the prince, it is not insofar as he has a title, but only insofar as he issues commands that are grounded on the adequate use of reason.⁶⁷ And note, of course, that this theme of Kant's article was redeployed by Foucault in his work on the latter:

And finally "to not want to be governed" is of course *not* accepting as true, here I will move along quickly, what an authority tells you is true, or at least not accepting it because an authority tells you that it is true, but rather accepting it only if you consider valid the reasons for doing so.⁶⁸

These remarks about a shift towards a certain form of internalism suggest that there has been, in the course of 'Western' history, a gradual shift towards a form of rationality that centers not on the principle of obedience, but in the principle of autonomy, a gradual restriction of what counts as a reason for individuals, a limitation of what counts as a reason to what they can recognize as a reason (be it a reason for believing something, for complying with a norm, for submitting to another person's will) on the basis of the rationality of its content rather than on the basis of any form of non-rationally grounded authority. And needless to say, the replacement of the principle of obedience by the principle of autonomy

66. Foucault, *Du gouvernement des vivants: cours au Collège de France 1979-1980*, p. 83.

67. Kant, "Kant: Was ist Aufklärung?", pp. 35-37.

68. Foucault, "What is Critique?", p. 47.

suggests, once again, that the idea of morality as obedience to a code is disappearing or has disappeared.

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The conjunction of the answer to the first two questions posed at the beginning of this section provides the resources for answering the third one: Why did Foucault believe that the aesthetics of existence must respond to the disappearance of a morality of obedience? On the one hand, it is clear that the kind of care of the self characteristic of Christian morality is closer to a metaphysics of the soul than to the aesthetics of existence. The principle of obedience that ultimately binds the individual to the code of norms within Christian morality is ultimately grounded in her acceptance of metaphysical truths about the being of her soul. The principle of autonomy is not grounded on such truths. It prescribes that the individual comply with norms only insofar as *she recognizes* that they have rational binding force over her by virtue of their content.

Furthermore, as we saw, one of the contrasting points between ancient and Christian morality was their respective ethical *telos*: in the case of Christianity, salvation; in the case of Greco-Roman morality, self-mastery or the affirmation of one's freedom by a set of practices that are geared towards giving one's life a form that one considers memorable, praiseworthy, ethically beautiful.

Finally, and this brings us full-circle back to Foucault's reformulation of the nihilist slogan, the principle of autonomy is a principle that prescribes the maximization of one's freedom, the constitution of oneself as an autonomous subject. But as we saw, from early on in his career, partly as a result of his work on Nietzsche in the early 1950s, Foucault developed an understanding of truth as being partially an effect of power. Furthermore, as we have seen, his historical enquiry into pastoral power (partly motivated, no doubt, by his work on Kant's *What is Enlightenment?* in 1978), led him to the realization of the pervasiveness of the risk of constituting oneself as a subject of power, of inadvertently constituting oneself as a point for the exercise of power and thereby inadvertently subjecting oneself to power even

when one is actively undertaking the project of ethical self-constitution. In other words, the enquiry into pastoral power led Foucault to the realization that the risk of subjecting oneself to power is pervasive, and in particular, that this risk is inherent in any attempt to address the question “what to do” by searching for or relying on ontological truths about what one is. In the face of this risk, the aesthetics of existence is a form of care of the self more likely to be conducive to one’s self-constitution as an autonomous subject than an approach that would be mediated by general truths about human being.

7.3 Freedom, the Aesthetics of Existence and the Virtue of Critique

Truth is in part an effect of power, reason normatively neutral, and normative commitments rooted in *thought* (forms of possible knowledge, normative matrixes of behavior, virtual forms of existence for possible subjects), *thought* that is in turn rooted in and largely determined by the historically singular form of experience of the culture within which our lives unfold (Chapters 3 and 5). Subjectivity is constituted through processes of subjectivation that do not belong to the order of subjectivity (Chapter 4). A morality of obedience to codes has given way to a morality of autonomy, of independence, of self-affirmation (Chapter 7). It is not surprising that Foucault would have been skeptical of any attempt to develop an ethical system that had the form of a set of purportedly universally valid prescriptive claims. But to take this to imply that his work on ethics yielded no substantive ethical views is to miss one of the most substantive upshots of his work on ethics: that there may be (and indeed are) other ways of thinking about ethics, other forms of ethical experience, than the Western traditional one according to which one is bound to obey a set of norms by virtue of certain body of truths about what it is to be a human being.

Put differently, the very content of Foucault’s ethical views is liable to render their import invisible to anyone who assumes that the only possible form of care of the self is what Foucault

refers to as a metaphysics of the soul, or roughly equivalently, to anyone who assumes, like MacIntyre, that the teleological schema that he describes in *After Virtue* captures the form of ethical experience 'itself,' and any conception of morality that is not an instance of the schema is liable to render ethical experience at worst unintelligible, and at best confused.

We thus have [throughout classical Greece and the Middle ages up to the Enlightenment] a threefold scheme in which human-nature-as-it-happens-to-be (human nature in its untutored state) is initially discrepant and discordant with the precepts of ethics and needs to be transformed by the instruction of practical reason and experience into human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realized-its-*telos*.⁶⁹

If we take for granted that this is the only way of thinking about ethics, then anything short of a set of norms or of list of virtues (whose attainment will require in any case compliance with a set of norms) will strike us as ethically vacuous.

But on Foucault's positive view, ethics need not and should not take the form of a set of prescriptions grounded on truths about human nature, and the pressing ethical task today is not to determine what norms and limits should constrain or thought and behavior and to show that the binding force of those norms upon us stems from truths about what is constitutive of human being.

From Foucault's perspective, for anyone who is committed to undertake the care of themselves, *and* to constitute themselves as a free individual, ethics can take the form of a reflexive choice to give their lives an ethically beautiful form, and ethical practice involve set of practices geared towards effectively giving their lives that form. That this choice should be reflexive means that the individual is to try, to the best of their capacity, and insofar as it is possible, to ensure that they make this choice, the choice of what life to live, the choice of the kind of ethically beautiful life that they are to live, autonomously.

But crucially, to choose autonomously is not the same as to choose arbitrarily. For if it is true that to learn to *think*—in Foucault's sense—is to become a subject, then who we are

69. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 53.

when we first undertake the project of the care of self is not no one. A subject of deliberation is always already a *subject* of deliberation, and deliberation is not rational insofar as it is made from a subjectless perspective—for there is none—but insofar as it is guided by reasons that are recognizable and explicable as such, and as the best, by the deliberating agent.

Through his work on ethics, Foucault carved a space between the Nietzschean ‘*nothing is true*’—in scare quotes—and the nihilist *everything is permitted*, a space between the disappearance of a morality of obedience grounded on truths about human nature, and the ultimately confused, half-celebratory half-anxious cry of the nihilist. For that ‘*thought* is the form of action’ is an acknowledgement that contrary to what the nihilist might suggest, to be an agent is to be bound by norms.

Thus the implication of the ‘nothing is true,’ of the twofold fact since any body of truths is in part a system of obligations, and any body of truths is in part an effect of power, an effect of the tendency of discursive and social practices, of discourses and institutions, to perpetuate themselves—the implication of this twofold fact is not that all norms lack genuine binding force. The implication is rather, first, that the fact that a given norm strikes us as genuinely binding is always liable to be merely an effect of power (in the sense of a mirage), second, and consequently, that the binding force of any given norm *can* always be called into question, always subjected to critical scrutiny, and thirdly—and note that this is a conditional claim—that *if* we are to undertake the ethical project of the active care of the self, and *if* our goal in undertaking the care of the self is to constitute ourselves as autonomous subjects, we *ought to* subject any norm that we submit to to critical scrutiny.

Thus Foucault’s claim, in *What is Critique?*, that there is something in critique that is akin to virtue, hence his undertaking the project considering the idea of critique as a virtue in that article from 1978, and his fascination with that idea through the rest of his life.⁷⁰

In this reappropriation and redeployment of Kant’s idea of critique, the concept of critique underwent an important shift, a shift that corresponds to the historical shift from a morality

70. Foucault, “What is Critique?”, p. 43.

of obedience to a morality of autonomy. The goal of ethical reasoning and of the critical attitude is not to draw the limits of thought and action by deducing the general form of the laws that circumscribe its appropriate use. It's goal is to extend the space of thought and action not by drawing the limits of the appropriate use of the former and by imposing boundaries on the latter, but by subjecting what we take to be those limits to critical scrutiny. Not to draw limits, not to determine what norms should constrain all rational behavior. But to determine, of the norms and limits that do in fact constrain our behavior, which ones are unnecessary. Not to determine what is impermissible, but to determine, of what seems impermissible, whether it really is impermissible.

Thus *What is Enlightenment*, a text of particular interest insofar as Foucault explicitly opposes his intellectual, ethical and political project to the development of a theory or doctrine, linking it instead with an ethos and attitude oriented towards the self-constitution of ourselves as autonomous subjects, thereby linking the idea of critique with what we have been considering under the guise of the relationship between the aesthetics of existence and the metaphysics of the soul:

I have been seeking, on the one hand, to emphasize the extent to which a type of philosophical interrogation—one that simultaneously problematizes man's relationship to the present, man's historical mode of being, and the constitution of the self as an autonomous subject—is rooted in the Enlightenment. On the other hand, I have been seeking to stress that the thread which may connect us with the Enlightenment is not faithfulness to doctrinal elements but, rather, the permanent reactivation of an attitude—that is, of a philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era.⁷¹

We must try to proceed with the analysis of ourselves as beings who are historically determined, to a certain extent, by the Enlightenment. Such an analysis implies a series of historical inquiries that are as precise as possible; and these

71. Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?", p. 312.

inquiries will not be oriented retrospectively toward the “essential kernel of rationality” that can be found in the Enlightenment, which would have to be preserved ‘come what may’; they will be oriented toward the “contemporary limits of the necessary,” that is, toward what is no longer indispensable for the constitution of ourselves as autonomous subjects.⁷²

The critical ontology of ourselves must be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it must be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.⁷³

In brief, on Foucault’s view, to the shift from a morality of obedience to a morality of autonomy must correspond a shift from an ethical theory that takes the form of a deductive grounding of a set of norms on a theory of human being (be it of the soul, of reason, of rational agency, of natural psychology, of health, of economic behavior), to an ethical attitude that consists of questioning and challenging every prescriptive claim, every norm that is put forth as a rule of conduct, and even those whose legitimacy seems most obvious.

This attitude is not based on a theory of human nature from which it would be possible to derive claims about a universal human *telos* whose attainment requires compliance with ethical norms. This attitude is oriented towards the constitution of ourselves by ourselves as autonomous subjects through the free choice of the kind of life we want to live and the engagement in the practices conducive to such a life. Crucially, to say that a choice is free is not to say that it is arbitrary. The attitude of critique is not an attitude that consists in the arbitrary rejection of any prescriptive claims, but one that consists in only submitting to those that withstand critical scrutiny. Hence the importance of the distinction drawn by

72. Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”, p. 313.

73. Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”, p. 319.

Foucault in *What is Critique?* between the aspiration “not to be governed at all,”⁷⁴ and the aspiration “not to be governed *in this way*, by this, in the name of these principles, in view of attaining these objectives and by means of these procedures, not like this, not for this, not by them,”⁷⁵ hence the claim that the aspiration not to be governed at all is a philosophical and theoretical paroxysm.⁷⁶

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Why must an aesthetics of existence correspond to the disappearance of a morality of obedience? Because it is a *form of moral conduct* (of *rapport à soi*, of ethical self-constitution) whose mode of subjection is not obedience to norms through the submission of the will, but self-constitution as an autonomous subject through the affirmation of one’s will and the constant critique of putative norms. And because it is a form of care of the self whose intelligibility does not rely on constitutive truths about human being, but on the possibility of reflexively developing an idea of the kind of life that one would like to live, and undertaking the practices that are required in order to give one’s life that form?

But isn’t there a risk that what one finds to be ethically beautiful is in fact morally problematic or even abhorrent? Certainly. But such a risk is not peculiar to the aesthetics of existence. History is fraught with examples of moral atrocities perpetrated under the banner of morality and justice. More importantly, the kind of aesthetics of existence advocated by Foucault is less liable to authorize the treatment of other individuals in ways they do not want to be treated than any form of metaphysics of the soul. For through the technique’ advocated by Foucault for the attainment of a condition of freedom, the sustained practice of critique, the “relaunching, as far and as widely as possible, the indefinite work of freedom”⁷⁷ through an enquiry into the limits of what strikes us as necessary, we are less likely to feel

74. Foucault, “What is Critique?”, p. 44.

75. Foucault, “What is Critique?”, p. 44.

76. Foucault, “What is Critique?”, p. 75.

77. Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”, p. 316.

authorized to let others be *compelled*, or to *compel* them ourselves, to comply with norms whose rational authority they do not recognize; we're less likely to treat others in ways they do not want to be treated under the pretext that there are constitutive facts about human being in general that warrant treating them in those ways, regardless of whether they accept those facts.

Part V

Conclusion

CHAPTER 8

BEYOND NIHILISM: THE WILL TO TRUTH AND THE SELF-CONSTITUTING FORCE OF ETHICAL NORMS

The question of nihilism is not: if God does not exist, everything is permitted. Its formula is rather a question: how to live if I must face up to the fact that ‘nothing is true’? At the heart of Western culture there is the difficulty of defining the link between the will to truth and the aesthetics of existence.¹

I began the dissertation drawing attention to Foucault’s two-step reformulation of the nihilist slogan. First, from the claim that “if God is dead, then everything is permitted” to the question: “How to live if I must face up to the fact that ‘nothing is true’?” And second, from that question, to the claim that at the heart of Western culture lies the difficulty of defining the link between the concern or the will to truth and the aesthetics of existence. The notions of the will to truth and the aesthetics of existence can be understood as the bookends of Foucault’s intellectual career, and these two reformulations of the nihilist slogan as a key for understanding Foucault’s overall intellectual project.

Early on in the 1950s, Foucault sought the means to break away from traditional ways of thinking and being. It was in the work on Nietzsche that he found such means: in the Nietzschean insight that ‘the will to truth’ and ‘the will to know’ are *in part*, inevitably, expressions of the will to power; in the Nietzschean insight about the non-teleological character of historical change; in the Nietzschean insight concerning the historicity of human being; in the Nietzschean insight regarding the possibility of a historical critique. Building on these insights, Foucault embarked on the project of thinking about the possibility of individual and collective self-transformation. He came to understand that ways of being a human being and corresponding conceptions of human essence come to be constituted in each historically singular and contingent cultural setting through processes of subjectivation that lie outside the register of subjectivity; that for the most part, we come to be passively constituted into the kinds of subjects that we are through our engagement in social practices and institutions; that to reflexively and rationally choose what kind of subject we want to become is no guarantee that we have attained any degree of freedom, for what possible ways of being seem available to us also tends to be a function of the historically singular form of

thought characteristic of our culture. Free self-constitution requires, beyond reflexivity and rational deliberation, supplementation by historical critique. If at the beginning of his career Foucault thought that a radical rupture with traditional ways of thinking and of being was ethically and politically necessary, three decades of philosophical and historical reflection eventually lead him to understand that, for these very reasons, if a radical break with tradition is radical insofar as it is immediate and global, then it is practically impossible and politically dangerous,² but if a break with tradition is radical not insofar as it is immediate and global, but insofar as it is a break not only with explicitly formulated ways of thinking and being, but with the deep structures and assumptions that ground them and make them seem necessary, then a radical break could be both practically possible and politically productive. It could be brought about through the active and sustained practice of critique, a historical critique of truth and subjectivity, a critique that, as he would eventually come to write, would “separate, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do or think.”³

In the last stage of his career, at a time where he was both systematically developing the idea of a historical critique and carrying out the historical critique of Western morality, Foucault came to identify obedience to a code of norms grounded on a set of metaphysical truths about human being as the central feature of Christian morality, and to identify a gradual cultural shift in the form of experience of the West, a shift toward a form of experience that centered around the general vindication of autonomy, and which called for, which rendered both necessary and inevitable, a corresponding reconfiguration of the form of moral experience.

The vindication of autonomy involved in this shift, coupled, on the one hand, with the Nietzschean insight that ‘nothing is true,’ that insofar as truth is partly a system of obligations, the ‘will to truth’ is partly an expression of the will to power, and coupled, on

2. Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”, p. 316.

3. Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”, p. 315.

the other hand, with the insight of the historicity of the form of subjectivity, gave rise to the philosophical and practical challenge of finding a way of addressing the question “how to live?” without relying on the assumption that there are universal truths about a historically constant form human subjectivity that could provide the answer to that question. Finally, through that same historical enquiry, Foucault developed the view that that challenge be met by undertaking the project of lending our lives an ethically beautiful form through the sustained practice of critique.

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In the *Introduction*, I noted that Foucault’s ethical project has been largely misunderstood, and that this misunderstanding has been largely related to the fact that the centrality of the notion of the aesthetics of existence has been underestimated. And I explained that this is in part related to a tendency to underplay its aesthetic dimension, possibly motivated by Pierre Hadot’s expression of a concern that Foucault’s ethical views might be too aesthetic, and in part a trend in the last decade to develop *parrhesia*-centered interpretations of Foucault’s ethical views.

In order to bring into view the centrality of the aesthetics of existence in Foucault’s ethical thought, my strategy has been to situate it within his overall intellectual project. This I have done by providing a reconstruction of the development of that project, and showing how the notion of the aesthetics of existence, along with the idea of a historical critique and the concept of subjectivation, constitute the key elements of Foucault’s solution to the ethical, political and philosophical problem that he set for himself early on in his career.

By way of conclusion, I would like to address a number of questions concerning the respective roles of truth and aesthetics in the ethical views of Michel Foucault, and how the conception of ethical life that he presents fits with his remarks and his insistence on the notion of *parrhesia*. Let me begin by sketching those questions:

To begin with, while this strategy has enabled me to bring into view the centrality of

the notion of aesthetics of existence, the question of what is distinctively aesthetic about it remains unanswered, and an analysis of the notion of ‘ethical beauty’ that is at work in the idea of an aesthetics of existence is yet to be provided. Insofar as Foucault himself is largely silent about this issue, and insofar as I have sought to maximize fidelity to Foucault’s views throughout the dissertation, leaving that question open seemed preferable than providing a speculative—in the sense of non-textually based—answer about what might have been Foucault’s systematic understanding of that notion of ethical beauty.⁴ Nonetheless, given the importance of the notion of the aesthetics of existence, and of ‘the aesthetic’ within that notion, I would like to take the opportunity to provide at least a schematic suggestion for how to understand the aesthetic dimension of the notion of the aesthetics of existence here in the conclusion.

Second, in the course of the dissertation, I have deliberately underemphasized the importance of the notion of *parrhesia*. This choice is not motivated by what would be an unwarranted assumption to the effect that there is a choice to be made between *parrhesia*-centered and aesthetics-of-existence-centered interpretations of Foucault’s ethical views. The choice was rather a methodological one. I wanted to see how much we can understand about the notion of the aesthetics of existence and about Foucault’s ethical views without relying on the concept of *parrhesia*. The results, I believe, provide us the resources to recast the notion of *parrhesia* and its role within Foucault’s ethical views in a new light. The necessity for doing so, as I noted in the introduction, stems from the fact that *parrhesia*-centered interpretations of Foucault’s ethical views tend to present the latter as the view that one must live *for the truth*, and that one’s life must display that commitment to *the truth*, but it would be paradoxical indeed if Foucault’s answer to the question “How to live if we must face up to the fact that ‘nothing is true’?” were “we must live for the truth,” So the question

4. The discussions of Baudelaire and dandyism in *What is Enlightenment* and in the lecture of February 29th at the *Collège de France* contain suggestive allusions to the modern idea of life as a work of art, but they are, in my view, insufficient to ground a reconstruction of what would have been Foucault’s systematic conception of ethical beauty. Based on the sources currently available, it seems to me that the only reasonable conclusion is that Foucault himself had not yet developed such a systematic conception of ethical beauty.

stands: how then should we understand the centrality of the notion of *parrhesia*, if not in Foucault's main publications in the last few years of his career, at least in his lectures at the *Collège de France* at that time?

Finally, and running through these two questions, so to speak, is the central, and we might say, the 'hard' question in Foucault's ethical views, and in Foucault work in general. How to understand the 'nothing is true' in Foucault's conception of truth, and correspondingly, what is the conception of truth at work in his ethical views, and how much room is there for a notion of truth in Foucault's ethical views? What I propose in the conclusion is to jointly address these questions by focusing on the latter. What is the concept of truth at work in Foucault's conception of ethical life, and what is its role within those ethical views?

8.1 Foucault's Conception of Truth: The Critique of Truth

Bringing fully into view Foucault's rich and subtle of conception of truth is well beyond the scope of this conclusion. So I shall begin by specifying, within the different points of interest in Foucault's conception of truth, the one that is of relevance for the discussion of the aesthetics of existence. In this regard, it is important to distinguish two questions concerning Foucault's conception of truth: whether and to what extent Foucault sought to undermine and abandon a traditional conception of truth, and what Foucault's views were about what we may think of as the status of truth as the source of binding force of norms of conduct over individuals. Before explaining what I mean by each of these questions and sketching the answers to them, let me note that it is the latter that is of central relevance to the discussion of Foucault's conception of the role of truth in ethics, and that accordingly, I shall only discuss the former insofar as it is necessary to clarify the distinction between the two questions and demarcate the scope of our present enquiry on the place for truth within Foucault's ethical views.

8.1.1 Foucault's Attitude towards the Traditional Conception of Truth

The first question is: "What is Foucault's conception of truth?" There is a number of difficulties in answering this question, the main one of which is perhaps that there is no single opus where Foucault attempts, to provide a definite and systematic answer to this question in his own voice.

There is, however, a supplementary obstacle, one that is not rooted in the kind of textual resources available for accounting for Foucault's conception of truth, but with a trend or tendency in attempts to provide such an account. The tendency has often been to approach the question through the question: "Given that Foucault's project with respect to truth was to radically break with or get altogether rid of the concept of truth: What were his views about truth (or about whatever alternative concept he proposed to replace it with)? How radically different were they from the traditional ones? And in light of this, how successful was his project of breaking away from a traditional conception of truth?" I shall henceforth refer to approaches to Foucault's conception of truth through these questions as *radicalizing* approaches.

As I noted in the second part of the dissertation, the overarching goal of Foucault's intellectual project was to break away from traditional ways of thinking that had revealed itself to be ethically and politically problematic. Insofar as a "traditional conception of truth" seemed to be one of the anchoring points of such ways of thinking and being, attaining that goal rendered necessary a critique of and a shift away from that traditional conception of truth. Hence the recurrence of the theme of a critique of truth in Foucault's work. Hence the tendency to approach the question of Foucault's conception of truth through the set of questions that I just mentioned.

Yet such an approach is deeply problematic. It imposes two interpretive constraints that are ultimately disparate, and whose satisfaction comes at the cost of a hopelessly uncharitable account of Foucault's conception of truth. We may think of these two constraints as a *radicality* constraint, and as an *intelligibility constraint*. The radicality constraint is the

requirement that the account of Foucault's conception of truth take into account the fact that Foucault's *project* was to radically break with or get altogether rid of the traditional concept of truth. The intelligibility constraint is the general (and rather weak) exegetical constraint that the views one ascribes to an author be at the very least intelligible.

The conjunction of the radicality and the intelligibility constraint forces a seemingly insurmountable dilemma upon partisans of radicalizing approaches to Foucault's conception of truth. If they attribute Foucault a conception of truth and truth-related phenomena whose intelligibility can be more or less easily brought into view, they thereby render their interpretation vulnerable to the objection that it fails to fulfill the radicality constraint, for the conception of truth it attributes to Foucault would not be, after all, all that different from the traditional one. If they attempt to satisfy the radicality constraint by attributing Foucault a conception of truth that is actually 'radically' different from the traditional one, they deprive themselves of the means of satisfying the intelligibility constraint. For by what measure can a conception of truth be said radically different from 'the traditional one' and still be recognizable as a conception of truth? Satisfying the radicality constraint requires attributing Foucault a conception of truth that is 'altogether different' from the traditional one, or the project of getting entirely rid of the concept of truth.⁵ But that leads to attributing Foucault, respectively, a conception of truth or a project that who are ultimately unintelligible, hopelessly confusing and hopelessly confused.

Admittedly, the radicalizing approach to Foucault's conception just sketched can seem so naive and uncharitable that it might seem implausible that anyone has endorsed it. But examples abound. To illustrate, consider Jacques Bouveresse's recent book on Foucault: *Nietzsche Against Foucault: On Truth, Knowledge and Power*.⁶ Early on in the book, Bouveresse describes Foucault's project in relation to truth as follows:

[Foucault] suggests that the moment has perhaps arrived for us to get entirely

5. Bouveresse, *Nietzsche contre Foucault. Sur la vérité, la connaissance et le pouvoir*, p. 3.

6. Bouveresse, *Nietzsche contre Foucault. Sur la vérité, la connaissance et le pouvoir*.

rid of notions such as truth and objectivity, and to attempt to think with other concepts.^{7,8,9}

Bouveresse takes Foucault's project to be that of completely ridding ourselves of notions such as the notion of truth and objectivity. Since it is unclear to so much as render intelligible what that project could amount to, it is not surprising that in order to explain how Foucault might have been led to pursue that project, Bouveresse is constrained to attribute him a rather elementary confusion between the concepts of truth, and of taking-to-be-true. Thus his central diagnostic claim:

Foucault lui-même et la plupart de ses disciples ont eu, me semble-t-il, une tendance à utiliser à propos de la vérité elle-même des façons de parler qui ne peuvent s'appliquer, en toute rigueur, qu'à d'autres choses: la connaissance de la vérité, l'acceptation d'une croyance comme vraie, etc.¹⁰

The central objection to be raised to the conception of 'truth' that results from that confusion is that it is incompatible with the realist's view:

Un réaliste — qui pense que, quand une proposition est vraie, elle est rendue vraie par une réalité qui est extérieure à la proposition et indépendante d'elle, ne dira jamais que c'est la vérité elle-même qui est produite.¹¹

Note, however, that within Bouveresse's discussion, the realist position plays the role of

7. In the opening pages of the book, Bouveresse distinguishes between two Foucault's, a French and an American one. The claim that I just cited is part of the characterization of the view of 'the French Foucault.' Yet insofar as Bouveresse eventually rejects the American (reading of) Foucault on grounds of inaccuracy (Bouveresse, *Nietzsche contre Foucault. Sur la vérité, la connaissance et le pouvoir*, p. 5), and focuses on the French one, the statement just quoted is representative of Bouveresse's conception of Foucault's views.

8. Bouveresse, *Nietzsche contre Foucault. Sur la vérité, la connaissance et le pouvoir*, p. 3.

9. "Il s'agit d'un Foucault qui suggère que le moment est peut-être venu de nous débarrasser complètement de notions comme celle de vérité et d'objectivité, et d'essayer de penser avec d'autres concepts."

10. Bouveresse, *Nietzsche contre Foucault. Sur la vérité, la connaissance et le pouvoir*, p. 6.

11. Bouveresse, *Nietzsche contre Foucault. Sur la vérité, la connaissance et le pouvoir*, p. 6.

what I have been referring to a traditional conception of truth.¹² Thus Bouveresse's reading of Foucault fits the pattern of radicalizing approaches. Foucault's project was the project of getting altogether rid of the traditional conception of truth. The radicalizing constraint is satisfied, but at the cost of rendering the intelligibility constraint unsatisfiable. If Foucault engaged in a project and adopted a view that are ultimately unintelligible, it must have been that he confused the concepts of truth and of belief.

The end result is an exegetically deeply problematic reading. In addition to attributing Foucault an unintelligible project and explaining his mistake by attributing him a rather basic confusion, it renders what would be the 'corrected version' of Foucault's project rather banal. For Foucault's project concerning the concept of truth, account taken of the distinction between truth and belief, would turn out to be the project of showing that as a result of various social phenomena, belief-formation processes and procedures are liable to issue in false beliefs, even in scientific contexts.

The ultimate source of the problem is the understanding of Foucault's project at work in radicalizing readings. The statement that Foucault sought to 'entirely rid himself' of the concepts of truth and objectivity, and even similar but weaker claims to the effect that his project was to replace the traditional concept of truth by a radically novel one, are at the very least misleading. As Foucault himself vindicates his commitment to a certain conception of truth:

I believe too much in truth not to suppose that there are different truths and different ways of speaking the truth.^{13,14}

If I highlight what I have been calling radicalizing approaches to Foucault's conception of truth and the fact that they are rooted in an initial assumption that Foucault's conception

12. The claim here is not that Bouveresse takes the realist position to be representative of the tradition as a whole, but that it is the version of the traditional conception of truth that he subscribes to.

13. Foucault, "An Aesthetics of Existence", p. 51.

14. "Je crois trop à la vérité pour ne pas supposer qu'il y a différentes vérités et différentes façons de les dire." (Michel Foucault. "Une esthétique de l'existence". In: *Dits et écrits*. Vol. II. Paris: Gallimard, 1984, 2001. Chap. 357, pp. 1549–1554, p. 1552)

of truth must amount to a substantive break with a traditional conception of truth, or that Foucault's project was to enable us to "entirely rid" ourselves of the notions of truth and objectivity, I do not mean to imply that these are obvious mistakes. Whatever the merits and demerits of Bouveresse's interpretation of Foucault, it is not an isolated case, but the latest echo in a long series of criticisms of attempts to account for Foucault's conception of truth. What explains the pervasiveness of the radicalizing strategy is no doubt that, as I noted in Chapter 3, when discussing the notion of truth, Foucault's emphasis tends to be on the idea of a *critique* of truth, that in those discussions he tends to situate himself against the tradition, and that in those contexts he tends to adopt a Nietzschean rhetorical strategy that often involves the use of paradoxical sounding claims designed to underscore, precisely, the contrast between the conceptions of truth that are his target and the alternative that he is proposing. Thus the emphasis is on how close his views are to a radical form of skepticism, on the extent to which truth is perspectival and historical, on how much contingency there is on our relationship to the truth, on how much untruth there is in our truth. Thus it is not uncommon, as I noted in Chapter 3 (§3.3), for Foucault to make statements that could suggest that he seeks to reduce truth to knowledge, or even belief, while at the same time writing about truth in such a way that suggests that a conception of truth that is still operative in his analysis and his remarks:

Il y a une connaissance [un discours de connaissance] d'avant la vérité. Ce qui veut dire, non pas au sens positiviste ou génétique: que la connaissance met longtemps à rencontrer la vérité où à la découvrir, qu'elle fixe les normes tardivement; mais que la vérité est une péripétie, une invention, peut-être un détournement de la connaissance, qu'elle n'en sera ni la norme, ni l'essence.¹⁵

[La vérité] est un produit ou un effet de la connaissance. Elle n'en est pas ni la norme, ni la condition, ni le fondement, ni la justification.¹⁶

15. Foucault, *Leçons sur la volonté de savoir: cours au Collège de France, 1970-1971*, p. 205.

16. Foucault, *Leçons sur la volonté de savoir: cours au Collège de France, 1970-1971*, p. 207.

In the face of passages like these, it is not unsurprising that the ‘radicality constraint’—the idea that Foucault’s conception of truth must be radically different from traditional conceptions of truth—has played such a prominent role within attempts to account for Foucault’s conception of truth, even where it leads to considerably uncharitable results. (Unsurprisingly, this is one of the passages cited by Bouveresse as evidence in favor of his reading of Foucault and of the idea that Foucault must be confusing “truth and the knowledge that one may (or may not) have of it”¹⁷.)

But as I also argued (§3.3.3, pp. 92-95), Foucault makes clear in various texts that his view is not that truth is reducible to an effect of discourse or knowledge. The goal of Foucault’s critique of truth is rather to problematize the traditional understanding of truth by showing that truth itself has a certain degree of historicity, and that *the history of truth* (i.e. of truth-related practices) is not the history of the gradual progress of human ‘knowledge’ toward the attainment of truth, but the history of substantive and somewhat accidental or contingent variations in what can and cannot be counted as true, in the kind of truths that there are and the different procedures whereby statements can be shown to be true, false, or outside the space of the truth and falsehood relative to each of those kinds of truth. In fact, only a rather superficial and decontextualized reading of passages like those just cited that could seem to warrant the view that Foucault advocated the reducibility of truth to knowledge.

For instance, the claims by Foucault concerning the relationship between truth and knowledge cited just above occur in a section of Foucault’s *Lectures of the Will to Know* entitled: “*The paradoxes of the will to truth.*” They belong to a context where Foucault’s topic is certain (i) *paradoxical* claims within (ii) *Nietzsche’s* conception of (iii) *the will to truth*, not to a context in which Foucault is (i) *articulating as clearly and directly as possible* (ii) *his own* views about (iii) *truth as such*. The goal of those passages is to bring into view and clarify Nietzsche’s conception of the role and implications of a traditional conception of truth

17. Bouveresse, *Nietzsche contre Foucault. Sur la vérité, la connaissance et le pouvoir*, pp. 40-41.

within knowledge-seeking and other closely related practices, rather than to suggest that the traditional concept of truth could or should be ‘completely’ abandoned. That Foucault preserves the language and rhetorical tone of Nietzsche’s language in his exposition is not a reason to take those claims to be meant in his own voice, but the opposite.¹⁸

If we lose this from sight, Foucault’s summary of the relevant discussion, only a couple of pages after those claims, becomes unintelligible:

Résumons tout cela.

Chez Aristote, la volonté de connaître est prise dans le préalable de la connaissance; elle n’était rien d’autre que le délai de la connaissance par rapport à elle-même et c’est pourquoi elle était désir, moins même encore que “désir,” elle était désir-plaisir. Et cela n’était possible que dans la mesure où la connaissance, sous la forme la plus élémentaire de la sensation) avait déjà rapport à la vérité.

Chez Nietzsche, la connaissance est un effet illusoire de l’affirmation frauduleuse de la vérité: la volonté qui les porte l’une et l’autre a ce double caractère: (1) d’être non pas du tout volonté de connaître, mais volonté de puissance; (2) de fonder entre connaissance et vérité un rapport de cruauté réciproque et de destruction. [...]

Mais qu’est-ce que la volonté de puissance ainsi mise au jour? Une vérité qui a été affranchie de l’être (immuable, éternel, vrai): le devenir. Et la connaissance qui le dévoile ne dévoile pas l’être, mais une vérité sans vérité.

Il y a donc deux “vérités sans vérité”:

— la vérité qui est erreur, mensonge, et illusion: la vérité qui n’est pas vraie;

18. I do not mean to suggest that Foucault does not endorse views akin to this that he attributes to Nietzsche. Only that since the passages in question are characterizations of Nietzsche’s view, to treat them as accurate formulations of Foucault’s own views is, to say the least, methodologically problematic.

— la vérité affranchie de cette vérité-mensonge, la vérité véridique, qui n'est pas réciprocal avec l'être.^{19,20}

Admittedly, the summary provided by Foucault is somewhat hermetic. But for present purposes, note simply, first, that as I suggested above, it is framed as a discussion of Nietzsche's views; and second, note that locutions such as "fraudulent affirmation of truth" and "truth without truth" would be rendered unintelligible by the assumption that Foucault is proposing that we entirely rid ourselves of the concept of truth. The goal of Foucault's discussion of Nietzsche's conception of truth is not to defend what would be the incoherent view that the concept of truth is entirely dispensable. It is rather to bring into view the historicity of truth: that truth is not about a being that is immutable, eternal and true, that it is not—contra Heidegger—the unveiling of an immutable, eternal and true being, but that it is rather about a reality over which *our grasp* is itself essentially historical and perspectival, always becoming, and to bring into view the implications of this insight concerning the history of truth for other aspects of our conception of truth, and of the role of our conception of truth in our knowledge-seeking practices and in our practical lives.

Now, acquiring a more precise understanding of this dimension of Foucault's conception

19. Foucault, *Leçons sur la volonté de savoir: cours au Collège de France, 1970-1971*, pp. 209-210.

20. "Lets summarize all of this.

In Aristotle, the will to know was taken to be rooted in what is prior to knowledge; it was nothing other than the lag between knowledge and itself and that is why it was desire, or even less than "desire," it was desire-pleasure. And that was only possible insofar as knowledge (in its most elementary form, sensation) was already taken to have a relationship to truth.

In Nietzsche, knowledge is an illusory effect of the fraudulent affirmation of the truth: the will that carries one and the other [i.e. knowledge and the fraudulent affirmation of the truth] has this double character: (1) of being not at all will to know, but will to power; (2) of establishing, between knowledge and truth, a relation of reciprocal cruelty and destruction.

[...] But what is this will to power, thus brought to light? A reality that has been freed from (immutable, eternal, true) being: becoming. And the knowledge that unveils [this will to power] does not unveil being, but a truth without truth.

There are, accordingly, two "truths without truth":

- the truth that is error, lie, illusion: the truth that isn't true;
- the truth that is freed from this truth-lie: the truth that is veridical, the truth that is not reciprocable with being."

See (Michel Foucault. *Lectures on the Will to Know*. Lectures at the College de France. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 218-219).

of truth, on what exactly Foucault's conception of truth, and of the role of the concept of truth in our knowledge-seeking practices are all, in my view, urgent tasks within Foucault scholarship, whose pursuit is likely to be philosophically very fruitful. But as I mentioned above, it is not a task that is necessary to undertake or that I could possibly undertake in this context. My target being a more precise understanding of the role of truth in Foucault's *ethical* views, the main point to retain from this discussion is that Foucault's conception of the role of truth in ethics does not rest on the assumption or imply that there is, literally, no truth or that nothing is true. Foucault's engagement with traditional conceptions of truth was not an attempt to altogether abandon, or as Bouveresse puts it, to entirely rid himself from the concept of truth. It was rather an attempt to problematize such traditional conceptions, an attempt to explore the question: how minimalistic a conception of truth can we get by with in order to render intelligible and account for our discursive and epistemological practices. That is, at any rate, the view that I partially defended in Chapter 3, and whose correctness I shall take for granted for the remainder of the conclusion.²¹

21. I should perhaps reiterate that I think this first question, the question: What is, or what can be said about, Foucault's conception of truth, and of its relation to traditional conceptions of truth?—merits a more thorough treatment than it was possible to provide within the scope of this dissertation, and that I do not take the brief remarks in Chapter 3 to constitute a conclusive argument in favor of the view that I just sketched. But let me add also that alternative readings according to which Foucault's conception of truth was more radical than I seem to grant, readings according to which Foucault did seek to get entirely rid of the concept of truth, in addition to facing a series of textual challenges, face the important challenge of having to account for what would then become Foucault's account of the intelligibility of a person's claim to be speaking the truth, and that here, invoking the idea that to assert the truth is to disguise an affirmation of the will to power as a purported but ultimately fraudulent will to truth is insufficient. For what is at issue in the question is precisely the intelligibility of the idea of a will to truth that would be, on this account, used as a disguise of the will to power. To put it differently, alternative readings of Foucault's conception of truth have to meet the non-trivial challenge of accounting for the intelligibility of a conception of discursive practices involving the assertion of descriptive statements without any reference to the notion of truth, it would require an account of the intelligibility of Foucault's notion of a game of truth independently of a notion of truth. But the notion of games of truth is itself only intelligible against the backdrop of the intelligibility of the possibility of speaking truthfully, and the traditional concept of truth is operative in the intelligibility of such a possibility. See, in this regard, Foucault's remarks in (Foucault, "The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom: An Interview with Michel Foucault on January 20, 1984", pp. 296-298)

8.2 Truth, Regimes of Truth, and the Binding Force of Norms

It is also possible to inquire into Foucault's conception of truth from a different although related perspective, by asking what were Foucault's views concerning the status of truth as the source of the binding force of norms of conduct over individuals.

Let me explain what I mean by this idea of truth as the source of the binding force of norms. In *The Government of the Living*, Foucault writes:

Régime de vérité. On parle de régime politique d'une façon qui n'est peut-être pas très claire, très bien définie, mais qui est tout de même relativement satisfaisante, pour désigner en somme l'ensemble des procédés et des institutions par lesquels les individus se trouvent engagés, d'une manière plus ou moins pressante, se trouvent contraints à obéir à des décisions; décisions qui émanent d'une autorité collective dans le cadre d'unités territoriales où cette autorité exerce un droit de souveraineté. On peut parler [également] de régime pénal, par exemple, pour désigner l'ensemble, là aussi, des procédés et institutions par lesquels les individus sont engagés, déterminés, contraints à se soumettre à des lois de portée générale. Alors, dans ces conditions, pourquoi en effet ne pas parler de régime de vérité pour désigner l'ensemble des procédés et institutions par lesquels les individus sont engagés et contraints à poser, dans certaines conditions et avec certains effets, des actes bien définis de vérité? Pourquoi après tout ne pas parler des obligations de vérité comme [on parle] des contraintes politiques ou des obligations juridiques? Obligations de faire ceci, obligations de dire vrai: est-ce qu'elles ne sont pas, jusqu'à un certain point, de même type ou, en tout cas, ne peut-on pas transférer les notions de régime politique et de régime juridique au problème de la vérité?²²

Foucault thus suggests a transposition of the notion of "regime" from contexts like "regime of government," "juridical regime," and "military regime," to a context in which what is

22. Foucault, *Du gouvernement des vivants: cours au Collège de France 1979-1980*, p. 92.

at issue is rather “the procedures and institutions whereby individuals are engaged and constrained, in certain conditions and with certain effects, well-defined acts of truth.” The notion of *binding force* I have invoked above and will continue to invoke in what follows corresponds to the idea of ‘constraining’ operative in the notion of a regime of truth: the ‘force’ by virtue of which, under certain circumstances, an individual must, or ought to, or should, or in fact does conduct herself in a particular way that conforms to particular norms.

It seems to me that the Foucault’s notion of ‘regime,’ and the Foucault-inspired notion the *binding force* of norms can be useful for approaching the question of Foucault’s views about the role of truth in ethical life. For we may speak of an ethical regime consisting of the procedures and institutions whereby individuals are engaged, determined and constrained to subject themselves to ethical norms of conduct, and we may use the notion of the binding force of ethical norms in order to raise the question of what are Foucault’s views about the source of the binding force of ethical norms in the ethical regime characteristic of each given historical setting, including our present one. Moreover, relying on the notion of an ethical regime and of the binding force of ethical norms, we may also formulate the more specific question that concerns us here, concerning the role of truth in ethics, as the question of whether, and in what sense, there is room for a conception of *truth as the source of the binding force of ethical norms* within past and present ethical regimes.

Moreover, Foucault’s discussion of regimes of truth is not only interesting insofar as it suggests the possibility of using the notion of an *ethical regime* in the discussion of his ethical views and of ethics in general. It is also interesting for our purposes in light of Foucault’s remarks about the idea of a *regime of truth* itself. In this connection, there are two sets of questions regarding truth and normative constraints, or truth and binding force, that we should be careful to distinguish. There is, on the hand, a set of questions about the normative constraints that govern the acceptance of claims as true or false, questions about the force *that binds individuals to accept, reject, or take a some stance* with respect to a given statement. There is, on the other hand, a set of questions about the normative

constraints imposed on an individual by her coming to accept (reject, etc.) a given claim as true.²³ The discussion that follows Foucault's introduction of the notion of a regimes of truth is focused on the first set of questions, those concerning what binds individuals to accept or recognize the truth as true. Foucault's focus is in the notion of regimes of truth as normative structures, so to speak, that constrain and govern the acceptance of claims as true (as true as well as the ways in that acceptance is to be manifested). Or to put it in terms of binding force, we will say that the focus of Foucault's interest lies in the source of the binding force of the—implicit or explicit—norms that govern the individual's conduct with respect to truth: and in particular, the norms that constrain individuals to recognize claims as true, to assent to them and to express or manifest their assent to them in a particular way. And this discussion, as we shall see, is rather important for bringing into view Foucault's conception of the binding force of ethical norms and of the role of truth as the source of the binding force of ethical norms.

8.2.1 Truth as a Source of Binding Force of Norms

After introducing the notion of a regime of truth, Foucault imagines that someone objects to the idea of a regime of truth along the following lines:

[V]ous parlez de régime de vérité, et quand on vous demande des exemples de régime de vérité, vous prenez l'exemple du christianisme, vous parlez des actes de croyance, vous parlez de profession de foi, vous parlez des aveux, de la confession. C'est-à-dire que toutes les obligations dont vous parlez, toutes ces obligations de vérité que vous évoquez ne concernent au fond que des non-vérités, ou alors elles sont indifférentes au fait qu'il s'agisse ou non de vérité, de vrai ou de faux. [...] On peut donc bien, dans ces cas-là, parler d'obligation, mais dans la mesure, justement, où la vérité en tant que telle n'est pas concernée. En revanche, quand

23. Naturally, the two set of questions can sometimes overlap.

il s'agit du vrai, la notion de régime de vérité devient en quelque sorte superfétatoire, et la vérité, au fond, n'a sans doute pas besoin de régime, de régime d'obligation. Il n'y a pas besoin d'invoquer un système d'obligations spécifique qui aurait pour rôle de faire valoir le vrai, de lui donner force de contrainte, d'y assujettir les individus, si vraiment c'est vrai. [...] Ce qui dans la recherche et la manifestation de la vérité me contraint, ce qui détermine mon rôle, ce qui m'assigne à faire telle et telle chose, ce qui m'oblige dans la procédure de manifestation de la vérité, c'est la structure du vrai lui-même. [...] C'est le vrai lui-même qui détermine son régime, c'est le vrai lui-même qui fait la loi, c'est le vrai lui-même qui m'oblige. C'est vrai, et je m'incline. Et je m'incline, puisque c'est vrai, et je m'incline dans la mesure où c'est vrai.²⁴

The objection would be thus that the notion of a “regime of truth” can only find application in contexts in which what is at stake is not the truth, but the necessity of constraining individuals to accept falsehoods as true. In this sense, it is not a stretch to say that Foucault imagines here that someone might be inclined to object to the notion of the regime of truth on similar grounds that Bouveresse objects to what he takes to be Foucault's conception of truth: it would be because Foucault equivocates between truth and taking-to-be-true that he is led to introduce the notion of a regime of truth, but the least to be said about his proposed idea of a regime of truth is that it would be more appropriate to think of the notion as that of a regime of deception than as a regime of truth. When it is really truth that is at issue, the objector maintains, what constrains the individual to accept a claim as true is nothing besides the fact that it is the truth. In opposition to the case of falsehoods that are passed as truth, truth is binding in and of itself, it is the source of its own binding force, it commands assent by itself:

C'est le vrai lui-même, et c'est tout. C'est bien cela l'évidence, et le caractère fondamental et fondateur de l'évidence dans les procédures de manifestation de

24. Foucault, *Du gouvernement des vivants: cours au Collège de France 1979-1980*, pp. 92-94.

la vérité, c'est que dans l'évidence, la manifestation du vrai et l'obligation dans laquelle je me trouve de le reconnaître et de le poser comme vrai coïncident exactement. L'évidence est en cela la meilleure preuve et démonstration qu'il n'y a pas besoin d'un régime de vérité s'ajoutant en quelque sorte au vrai lui-même.²⁵

As I mentioned, it seems to me that Foucault's response to this objection is profoundly illuminating with respect to his conception of truth, and of the importance and impact of the insight that truth is historical on his conception of truth:

[L]orsqu'on dit que dans la vérité, ce qui oblige c'est le vrai et que le vrai seul est ce qui oblige, on risque de manquer une distinction qui est, je crois, importante. Il ne faut pas, en effet, confondre deux choses. Il y a d'une part le principe que le vrai est *index sui*, c'est-à-dire, en lui ôtant sa signification proprement spinoziste, ce principe que seule la vérité peut montrer légitimement le vrai, que seul en tout cas le jeu du vrai et du faux peut démontrer ce qui est vrai. Mais que le vrai soit *index sui* ne veut pas dire pour autant que la vérité soit *rex sui*, que la vérité soit *lex sui*, que la vérité soit *judex sui*.²⁶

The distinction of between truth being its own index or indicator, and truth being its own king, its law or its judge, its being the commander that prescribe its acceptance, is a distinction between what makes a claim true, and recognizable as such, and the *force that binds individuals* to recognize that it is true, that commands the individual's assent to the claim, that constrains him to submit to it. Or, as Foucault also puts it, the idea that there is a distinction between the idea that truth is its own index, and the idea that it is its own commander, corresponds to the idea that source of the force of the "therefore" in statements of the form: "such are the facts, therefore I accept this claim as true" is to be distinguished

25. Foucault, *Du gouvernement des vivants: cours au Collège de France 1979-1980*, p. 93.

26. Foucault, *Du gouvernement des vivants: cours au Collège de France 1979-1980*, p. 94.

from what the individual takes to be the evidence of its being true²⁷:

Pour [exprimer] les choses très simplement, d'une façon quasi enfantine ou tout à fait enfantine: sous tous les raisonnements aussi rigoureusement bâtis qu'on les imagine, sous même le fait de reconnaître quelque chose comme une évidence, il y a toujours, et il faut toujours supposer une certaine affirmation, une affirmation qui n'est pas de l'ordre logique de la constatation ou de la déduction, autrement dit une affirmation qui n'est pas exactement de l'ordre du vrai ou du faux, qui est plutôt une sorte d'engagement, de profession. Il y a toujours, sous tout raisonnement, cette affirmation ou profession qui consiste à dire: si c'est vrai, je m'inclinerai; c'est vrai *donc* je m'incline; c'est vrai, donc je suis lié. Mais ce "donc" du "c'est vrai, donc je m'incline; c'est vrai, donc je suis lié," ce "donc" n'est pas un "donc" logique, il ne peut reposer sur aucune évidence, il n'est d'ailleurs pas univoque. Si dans un certain nombre de cas, dans un certain nombre de jeux de vérité, comme justement la logique des sciences, ce "donc" va tellement de soi qu'il est comme transparent et qu'on ne se rend pas compte de sa présence, il n'en reste pas moins qu'avec un petit peu de recul et quand on prend justement la science comme un phénomène historique, le "c'est vrai, donc je m'incline" devient beaucoup plus énigmatique, beaucoup plus obscur.²⁸

Note that in the first half of the passage, the reference to reasonings and to the recognition of something as an evidence suggests that what is meant to be captured in the claim "it's true, therefore I submit" is not the idea that there is a logical (even less so a temporal) gap between coming to understand that something is true and coming to accept (i.e. believe) that it is true, as though it were possible to say, and literally mean: this is true, but I do not

27. On Foucault's view, blindness to the first distinction would lead to blindness to the second, while awareness of the first would bring into view not only that there are different ways of interpreting the *therefore* in claims of that form, but that adequately understood, the source of the force of the "therefore" is not truth, but ultimately, the relevant individual's endorsement of the relevant regime of truth (Foucault, *Du gouvernement des vivants: cours au Collège de France 1979-1980*, p. 95).

28. Foucault, *Du gouvernement des vivants: cours au Collège de France 1979-1980*, pp. 94-95.

believe that it is true.²⁹ The focus is rather on the move from the recognition of something as evidence for a claim to the acceptance of that claim.

There is, on Foucault's view, a certain move that stands in need of explanation: the move, to give an example provided by Foucault, from the acceptance of the soundness of a line of reasoning to the endorsement of its conclusion. But to insist, it is crucial for understanding this passage that Foucault does not mean to be describing a temporal process, that he is not presupposing that there is a temporal distance between coming to recognize something as evident and assenting to it. His idea is rather that the very possibility of recognizing something as irrecusable evidence for a claim that is *ipso facto* endorsed relies on the potentially implicit commitment that is expressed by the affirmation: "it is true, therefore I assent" or "whenever it is true I will assent." What Foucault wants to insist upon is that that move can never be fully accounted for, that in fact it cannot be at all accounted for, by the availability of the evidence at hand, or by its having been recognized as evidence. For how could it be, if the commitment to assent to whatever is revealed to be evidently true undergirds the possibility of so much as recognizing something as evident? For the same reason, even the cases brought up by the objector, cases where it seems that the evidence is enough to command assent, are not on, on Foucault's view, cases where 'the truth' commands assent all by itself. Regimes of this kind are limit-cases, and they are to be

29. In a discussion reminiscent of the famous discussion of Descartes in the *History of Madness*, and the ensuing debate with Derrida, Foucault writes a few paragraphs below the remarks just cited that even in the face of what seems to be irrecusable evidence, such as the evidence of the *cogito*, there is a certain type of subject for whom withholding assent: the mad person. Thus it might seem that in denying that Foucault's suggestion is that it is possible for individuals to simultaneously recognize something as true, and refuse assenting to it, I might be misrepresenting Foucault's view. Yet importantly, in the course of the discussion of the mad person's attitude towards the *cogito*, Foucault does not describe the mad person as someone who recognizes its truth and nonetheless withholds assent. Tellingly, he writes: "The exclusion of madness is therefore the fundamental act in the organization of the regime of truth, of the regime of truth that will have the particular property if being such that, when it is evident, one will bow, that will have the particular property that it will be truth itself that will constrain the individual to bow" (Foucault, *Du gouvernement des vivants: cours au Collège de France 1979-1980*, p. 96). That the mad person is excluded from this particular type of regime of truth means that it is not merely the case that he violates the constraints characteristic of that regime, but that he is, so to speak, outside the space where those constraints are operative and beyond their reach. The person who does not assent to the *cogito*, the person who looks at his arms and denies that they are his, is not someone who can say "it is true, but I don't believe that it is" in the same sense that a someone within that regime of truth might understand that claim.

understood as cases in which the central constraint that governs the endorsement of a claim as true is the one captured by the aforementioned principle: “if it is evident, and insofar as it is evident, I will assent,”³⁰ not as cases in which truth would be acting as *rex, lex or judex sui*, in which truth would be acting as the source of the force that commands assent.

The objection to the notion of regimes of truth was that the notion is only relevant where what is at stake is not the truth, but that in cases in which what is at stake is the truth and nothing else, there is no need or room for notion of a regime of truth, for the only thing constraining the acceptance of a claim as truth in those cases is its being truth, its manifesting itself as evidently true. Foucault’s response to the objection is, schematically, that the notion of a regime of truth finds application even in cases where what is at stake is only the truth, that even those are cases in which what commands the individual’s assent is not truth itself or its manifestation as evidently true, but rather the individual’s commitment to submit or assent to what presents to herself as evidently true:

Ce “donc” qui lie le “c’est vrai” [of evidence] et le “je m’incline” [of assent] ou qui donne à la vérité le droit de dire: tu es forcé de m’accepter parce que je suis la vérité, dans ce “donc,” dans ce “tu es forcé,” “tu es contraint,” “tu dois t’incliner,” dans ce “tu dois” de la vérité, il y a quelque chose qui ne relève pas de la vérité elle-même, dans sa structure et dans son contenu. Le “tu dois” interne à la vérité, le “tu dois” immanent à la manifestation de la vérité, c’est là un problème que la science en elle-même ne peut pas justifier et reprendre en compte. Ce “tu dois” est un problème, un problème historico-culturel qui est, je crois, fondamental.³¹

Note Foucault’s insistence on the two following points. First, that what is at issue is the binding force of truth, the question whether truth, in and of itself, can be said to bind individuals to assent to it. Second, the negative answer to that question in the idea that the binding force of truth does not have its source in truth itself. After laying out the

30. Foucault, *Du gouvernement des vivants: cours au Collège de France 1979-1980*, p. 96.

31. Foucault, *Du gouvernement des vivants: cours au Collège de France 1979-1980*, p. 95.

argument,³² Foucault further clarifies his conception of the source of binding force of truth by two examples, the first of which I'd like to discuss one in some detail:

Pour prendre un exemple lui aussi très élémentaire, je dirai ceci: imaginons deux logiciens qui discutent et dont le raisonnement en commun conduira à une proposition qu'ils reconnaissent tous les deux comme étant une proposition vraie, bien que l'un des deux, au début de la discussion, ait nié cette proposition. Au bout de ce raisonnement, celui qui, au début, avait nié la proposition et qui, à la fin, la reconnaît, dira explicitement ou implicitement: c'est vrai, donc je m'incline. Quand il dit "c'est vrai, donc je m'incline," qu'est-ce qui se passe ? S'il dit "c'est vrai," ce n'est pas en tant qu'il est logicien, enfin je veux dire: ce n'est pas parce qu'il est logicien que la proposition est vraie. Si la proposition est vraie, c'est parce que c'est de la logique ou que, en tout cas, la logique a été choisie telle et telle, avec ses symboles, avec ses règles de construction, ses axiomes, sa grammaire. Donc, pour que la proposition soit vraie, il faut et il suffit qu'il y ait de la logique, qu'il y ait des règles de cette logique, qu'il y ait des règles de construction, des règles de syntaxe, et que cette logique opère. C'est donc la logique, définie dans sa structure particulière, qui va assurer le fait que la proposition est vraie. Mais lorsqu'il dit "c'est vrai, donc je m'incline," ce "donc," ce n'est pas au fond parce que c'est de la logique qu'il le prononce. Ce n'est pas de la logique, car ce n'est pas la vérité de la proposition qui le contraint effectivement, ce n'est pas parce que c'est de la logique, c'est parce qu'il est logicien, ou plutôt c'est dans la mesure où il *fait* de la logique, car ce n'est pas son statut de logicien ou sa qualification de logicien qui fait qu'il s'incline (il pourrait n'être pas logicien de profession et il s'inclinerait de même), mais c'est parce qu'il fait de la logique, c'est-à-dire parce qu'il s'est constitué

32. I should note, in passing, that rather than provide an argument, Foucault's claims seem to be intended to work as the kind of observations whose correctness does not require further support.

lui-même, ou qu'il a été invité à se constituer comme opérateur dans un certain nombre de pratiques ou comme partenaire dans un certain type de jeu. Et il se trouve que ce jeu de la logique est tel que le vrai sera considéré comme ayant en lui-même, et sans autre considération, valeur contraignante. La logique est un jeu où tout l'effet du vrai sera de contraindre toute personne jouant le jeu et suivant la procédure réglée à la reconnaître pour vraie. On peut dire qu'avec la logique on a un régime de vérité où le fait que ce soit un régime disparaît, ou en tout cas n'apparaît pas, parce que c'est un régime de vérité où la démonstration comme auto-indexation du vrai est acceptée comme ayant un pouvoir absolu de contrainte. Dans la logique, le régime de vérité et l'auto-indexation du vrai sont identifiés, de sorte que le régime de vérité n'apparaît pas comme tel.³³

Foucault insists in this passage that the truth of the relevant proposition (i.e. the proposition that the logicians initially disagreed upon) does not depend on the logicians, but on logic itself: on its language, its syntax, its rules of construction.³⁴ At the same time, he insists that if the logician acquiesces, if she finds herself constrained, by the soundness of the line of reasoning pursued with her colleague, to abandon her original view, it is not because logic itself (its language, its syntax, etc.) constrains her, but because she is *doing* logic, because she is playing the game of logic, and ultimately—Foucault says this in passing, but it is significant—it is because she has *constituted herself*, or because she has been invited to *constitute herself* as the operator in a certain number of practices or as a partner in a certain kind of game. In other words, it is because the logician has constituted herself as a player of a certain game of logic, and because playing that game consists in following particular procedures for recognizing propositions as true, and assenting to the propositions that come to be recognized as true through those procedures, it is because of her commitment to play this game, to partake in this practice, to accept this regime, that the logician submits to the

33. Foucault, *Du gouvernement des vivants: cours au Collège de France 1979-1980*, pp. 95-97.

34. Yet another instance, note in passing, of a passage that becomes perfectly unintelligible if one thinks of Foucault as someone whose project was to entirely rid himself of the concept of truth.

truths of logic; it by is her commitment that she is bound to submit to any logically sound line of reasoning, it is in her commitment that lies the source of the force that moves her to assent.

And note, finally, that the view thus outlined by Foucault is not one according to which truth could be accurately said not to play any role in determining *what* the individual is and is not constrained to accept as true. Foucault's view, in simple terms, is, first, that there is a distinction to be drawn between on the one hand, *what determines the content of the constraints* that are at work in any given regime of truth, and on the other hand *the source of the force* that binds or compels the subjects of that regime to comply with those constraints. Second, that the source of the force of those constraints over an individual always lies ultimately in their commitment to submit to the relevant regime of truth, and not in the truth itself. This does not mean that truth does not play any role in determining the constraints at work in a regime of truth. It only means that at least in the kind of cases invoked by the objector, the role of truth is that of being the only factor determining *the content of the constraints* that make up the regime and that its subjects ought to comply with. Even in these cases, so Foucault argues, the source of the binding force of those constraints is to be located in the individual's constitution of themselves as a subject of that regime, in their decision, implicit or explicit, to act as players of that particular game of truth.

8.2.2 *Ethical Regimes, Truth, and the Binding Force of Ethical Norms*

The conceptual apparatus deployed by Foucault in *The Government of the Living* enables us to provide a more precise articulation of the question of the role of truth in Foucault's ethical proposal, as the question of whether, and in what sense, there is room for a conception of truth as the source of the binding force *of ethical norms* within the type of approach to ethics advocated by Foucault.

The preceding discussion of the binding force of the norms that regulate the acceptance

of statements as truth can be helpful in this regard. For within that context, it emerged that Foucault's view about the binding force of those norms is that its source ultimately lies in the individual's constitution of herself as a subject of a certain kind: the subject of a particular type of regime of truth, player of a particular game of truth, participant in a certain set of interconnected truth-production practices. The logician to whom one would ask: "why accord your assent to that statement?" might reply: "because I am *doing* logic, and doing logic essentially involves complying with norms that require assenting to statements like this one under circumstances like these."

Moreover, as I argued in the previous chapter, although the issue was approached from a considerably different angle, namely from a consideration of the contrast between what Foucault refers to as the metaphysics of the soul and as the aesthetics of existence, a similar claim can be made about the binding force of ethical norms. Within the aesthetics of existence, the binding force of a given ethical norm over a given individual lies precisely in that individual's commitment to constitute herself as a certain type of ethical subject, a type of ethical subject such that being or becoming a subject of that type requires complying with the norm in question.

8.2.3 The Role of Truth Within the Aesthetics of Existence

What is the role of truth within Foucault's ethical views? It seems to me important to begin by distinguishing two different registers on which Foucault engages ethical questions. On the higher, most abstract register is Foucault's conception of the form of moral conduct, considered in detail in Chapter 5. The idea of the form of moral conduct, as I suggested, is not a substantive ethical theory, but a schema developed in order to be able to describe the various historically singular forms of moral conduct and of ethical experience that have emerged in the course of history. To say that the ideas of the form of moral conduct, of thought (in Foucault's technical sense) and of a form of experience, are schematic and non-substantive is, in part, to say that they are normatively neutral, that in and off themselves,

they have no normative implications. The historical instantiations of these structures or schemata, on the contrary, do involve substantive commitments.

Now, I have suggested that Foucault's reformulation of the claim that God is dead by the claim that 'nothing is true,' qualified as it is by the scare quotes, is meant to indicate that issue of nihilism is less directly indexed to the idea of the loss of faith than it is to a transformation in human being's self-understanding: no longer a kind of being whose existence has an intrinsic purpose, but an entity lacking such a purpose. 'Nothing is true' is not to be heard as the claim that nothing is true, but as the claim that there are no universally valid teleological truths about human being as such. At least in this regard, there is an important shift between the role of truth in the ethical perspective advocated by Foucault and traditional or even contemporary constitutivist conceptions of the role of truth in ethics according to which the very intelligibility of the idea that human beings ought to comply with various ethical and moral norms depends on the validity of a teleological conception of human being as such.

But even in noting this, it is important to keep in mind that these claims about there having been a historical shift in 'our' conception of human being, are at the lower, concrete level register of analysis. In characterizing our conception of human being as non-teleological, in characterizing the contrast between an ethical regime centered around the notion of obligation to a code of norms and an ethical regime centered around the notion of autonomous self-constitution, Foucault does not mean to be imposing constraints on what should be a conception of the general, transhistorical form of moral conduct, but only to be describing what he takes to be the form of ethical experience of 19th and 20th Century Europe.

Foucault suggests that the form of the care of the self, or the way of undertaking the project of constituting ourselves as autonomous subjects that best fits our ethical experience is the aesthetics of existence, which consists in undertaking the project of lending our lives an ethically beautiful form by critically and reflexively undertaking the labor of self-constitution. By contrast to the metaphysics of the soul, which consists in an enquiry into the essence

of human being in order to discover its intrinsic telos, to then live in accordance with that truth, the aesthetics of existence consists in the reflexive and critical choice of an ethically beautiful form that one would like to give one's life. The source of the binding force of ethical norms in each case are thus significantly different: teleological truths about human being in general in one case, the affirmation of one's freedom by living an ethically beautifully. Truth and subjection to that truth on the one hand. Ethical beauty and the affirmation of one's freedom on the other. In this way, it is clear that the aesthetics of existence involves a minimization of the role of truth and the intellectual pursuit of truth in ethics relative to the aesthetics of existence.

Two remarks are in order here. First, to say that the role of truth within Foucault's proposed ethical views is minimized is not the same as to say that he 'entirely' gets rid of the notion of truth in ethics. The notion of truth remains indispensable, but not in a more significant way than it is indispensable in any other practical endeavor. One cannot play chess without keeping in mind the rule of chess, facts about the state of the chessboard, and so forth. It would be a gross misrepresentation to infer from this that the game of chess is a game of truth, or a game that centers around the pursuit of truth, etc. But it would be no less misleading to say that the notion of truth is not operative in the game of chess. Although almost too trivial to be worth mentioning, it is indeed at work in the activity.

Second, one might worry that Foucault's position is not different from the metaphysics of the soul. If he rejects teleological conceptions of human being, it is because he replaces a traditional, teleological metaphysics of the soul by a stylistics of subjected bodies. Thus, his strategy to ground ethical views, no less than the tradition that he seeks to demarcate himself from, consists in deriving normative implications from a preconceived conception of human being as such. It seems to me that this would be a misunderstanding of the valence of the idea of an aesthetics of aesthetics of existence within Foucault's ethical views. The aesthetics of existence is not meant to be an approach to ethics that, according to Foucault, every individual should or ought to undertake. It is not an ethical principle that

all individuals ought to comply with on pains of failing ethically. It is advanced merely as a plausible way of addressing the nihilistic challenge of addressing the question how to live without recourse to a conception of the kind of beings that we are from which a positive and universal answer to that question could be derived. Admittedly, part of what motivates Foucault's fascination with the aesthetics of existence is that it offers a mode of engagement with the ethical dimension of life that is freedom or autonomy-maximizing. In this regard, it is a conception of ethical life that is closely related to a conception of human being as autonomous. So it is not inaccurate to say that it is partially intended as a strategy for the pursuit of freedom. Even so, the aesthetics of existence is not put forth by Foucault as an ethical regime compliance with which could be deductively shown to be a requirement of human individuals by virtue of the fact that they are or ought to strive to be autonomous, or by virtue of any other metaphysical fact about them.

8.3 The Concept of Parrhesia and the Aesthetics of Existence

As I mentioned in the opening pages of the conclusion, throughout the dissertation I have deliberately left the notion of *parrhesia* almost entirely out of consideration, not because I believe the notion is not of central interest to the later Foucault, but in order to avail myself of the means to develop an understanding of the notion of the aesthetics of existence that contrary to the tendency in contemporary discussions of Foucault, would be more or less independent from the notion of *parrhesia*. In this section, I propose to briefly outline my views about what in the introduction I referred to *parrhesia*-centered interpretations of Foucault's ethical views, and my own conception of the status and role of the notion of *parrhesia* within Foucault's ethical views.

In the introduction of the dissertation, I noted two features of *parrhesia*-centered interpretations of Foucault's ethical views that seem to me problematic. On the one hand, motivated by the worry that by attributing Foucault a conception of ethics centered around the notion of the aesthetics of existence, they tend to underplay the importance of the latter,

and tend to err on the side of reducing the aesthetic dimension of the aesthetics of existence to the kind of ethical beauty characteristic of the parrhesiastic life (harmony between deeds and words, etc.). By so doing, *parrhesia*-centered interpretations tend to forsake the resources for explaining Foucault's insistence that the notion of the aesthetics of existence best captures the approach to ethics that he'd recommend for today. On the other hand, by emphasizing the reference to truth in certain, political uses of the notion of *parrhesia*, such interpretations tend to introduce a certain tension that is in fact absent from Foucault's views, properly understood: a tension between the question: How to live if one must face up to the fact that 'nothing is true'?, and the purported answer: live a life marked by the courage to speak the truth.

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Now, one of the fundamental problems with *parrhesia*-centered interpretations is rooted in the translation of the notion of *parrhesia* as courageous truth-speaking. Furthermore, once the term is thus translated, the emphasis tends to be laid on the notion of *truth*-speaking, resulting on all the aforementioned issues: neglect of the notion of the aesthetics of existence, perplexing emphasis on the notion of truth. As Foucault's own discussion of the etymology of the Greek term makes clear, the latter does not contain an explicit or 'etymologically encoded' reference to the concepts of truth or of courage.

Parrhesia, étymologiquement, c'est le fait de tout dire (franchise, ouverture de coeur, ouverture de parole, ouverture de langage, liberté de parole). Les Latins traduisent en général *parrhesia* par *libertas*. C'est l'ouverture qui fait qu'on dit, qu'on dit ce qu'on a à dire, qu'on dit ce qu'on a envie de dire, qu'on dit ce qu'on pense devoir dire parce que c'est nécessaire, parce que c'est utile, parce que c'est vrai.^{35,36}

35. Note, in passing, that truth is listed as one among various possible candidate for 'saying what one says' when one speaks parrhesiastically.

36. Foucault, *Le courage de la vérité. Le gouvernement de soi et des autres II: cours au Collège de France. 1984*, p. 348.

Note here, that the emphasis lies not in the idea of speaking the truth, but in a way of speaking, a mode of speech, a form of discourse. And note that the idea of courage is entirely absent from the discussion.

Moreover, after introducing the discussion of the etymology of the term, Foucault highlights the main aspects of the notion that drive his interest in the notion³⁷:

[A]u fond ce dont il s'agit dans la *parrhesia*, c'est de cette rhétorique propre ou de rhétorique non rhétorique qui doit être celle du discours philosophique. [...] Donc, il ne peut pas y avoir de *logos* philosophique sans cette espèce de corps de langage, corps de langage qui a ses qualités propres, sa plastique propre, et qui a ses effets, effets pathétiques et qui sont nécessaires. Mais ce qui doit être nécessaire, la manière de régler ces éléments (éléments verbaux, éléments qui ont pour fonction d'agir directement sur l'âme), ce ne doit pas être, quand on est philosophe, cet art, cette *tekhnê* qui est celle de la rhétorique. Ce doit être cette autre chose qui est à la fois une technique et une éthique, qui est à la fois un art et une morale, et que l'on appelle la *parrhesia*.³⁸

Hence, at least in its origin, there are at least three aspects of the notion of *parrhesia* of central interest to Foucault: *parrhesia* insofar as it is (at least in some of its forms) the form of *philosophical discourse* par excellence; *parrhesia* as it is a *form* of discourse, as form to be given to philosophical discourse through a particular *art* or technique; and *parrhesia* insofar as it is at the same time an ethics of a moral, insofar as it involves a way of being.

A detailed discussion of the notion of *parrhesia* is well beyond my present aims. But these remarks should be enough to cast serious doubts on the view that the best way to understand the content of the notion of *parrhesia* as it figures in Foucault's work is as the

37. The main aspects of the notion that drive his interest at least in this initial stage. The notion of *parrhesia* continued to serve as one of the main guiding threads within Foucault's lectures at the *Collège de France* since its early occurrences on March 3, 1981 until the end of final lectures in 1984, and in the course of those years Foucault's interest in the notion sometimes veered towards other aspects and uses of it.

38. Foucault, *Le courage de la vérité. Le gouvernement de soi et des autres II: cours au Collège de France. 1984*, p. 350.

idea of courageous truth-speaking, and by laying particular stress on the reference to truth in that way of understanding it.³⁹

Consequently, one of the main sources of the difficulties with *parrhesia*-centered interpretations is that they tend to interpret the overemphasize the implicit reference to truth and truthfulness in that the notion. But as I mentioned, in addition to raising questions of interpretive accuracy, this interpretive choice also introduces a tension in Foucault's overall ethical views that is both absent from Foucault's views properly understood, and textually unnecessary.

These problems disappear once we bring into view both centrality of the notion of the aesthetics of existence in Foucault's ethical views, and the fact that notion of truth is ultimately not central to the notion of *parrhesia*. Foucault's central interest in the notion of *parrhesia* lies, as noted, in the fact that it is at once the notion of a form of speech and of a certain ethos characteristic of a certain way of life, the philosophical life.

I should make clear that through these remarks, I do not mean to suggest that the notion of truth is altogether irrelevant or mostly tangential to Foucault's interest in the notion of *parrhesia*. The central point is rather that there is a certain valuation of the notion of truth that *parrhesia*-centered interpretations tend to at least implicitly attribute to Foucault's conception of *parrhesia* and that I think is perfectly—in the quantitative sense of the term—absent from Foucault's use of that notion, namely, the idea that truth is valuable in itself, that it is to be pursued for its own sake, that one of the reasons that the *parrhesiastic* life might be worth living is that it is a way of life that assigns value to (or recognizes the value of) truth above all else.⁴⁰

39. qualification: political *parrhesia* and cynical *parrhesia*, in those discussions courage and truthfulness seem more prominent.

40. Though I cannot develop the point here, I shall settle for noting that in the case of political *parrhesia*, it is manifest that the interest in truth is secondary and subservient to the interest in the well-being of the city, and in what could be expected to be the more problematic case of philosophical *parrhesia*, Foucault's choice of example and discussions of those examples is telling. Two paradigmatic examples, two of the ones develop in most detail, are Socratic *parrhesia* and the *parrhesia* of the cynics. The latter are chosen precisely as an illustration of a mode of undertaking the care of the self that corresponds to the aesthetics of existence (Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège de France*

Once these aspects of Foucault's interest in the notion of *parrhesia* are brought into view, it also becomes manifest that the notions of the aesthetics of existence and of *parrhesia* complement one another, that it is not necessary to subordinate one to the other, or to choose among them as though they generated competing and mutually exclusive approaches to ethics. But let me insist, with one caveat: insofar as the notion of *parrhesia* is indexed to a distinctively philosophical form of the care of the self, it seems to me that it is narrower in scope than the notion of the aesthetics of existence. The overlap between the two notions is only partial, at least insofar as it is possible to living *parrhesiastically* is not a necessary component of undertaking the project of lending one's life a beautiful form.

1983-1984, p.165), as an example of a mode of the the care of the self that is minimally motivated by doctrinal considerations, and that consists in a deliberate and reflexive effort to affirm one's autonomy by undertaking the project of giving one's life a certain form. Thus in the case of *parrhesia*, and this is a recurrent theme in Foucault's discussion of the cynics, aside from its social or political function, the emphasis in the idea of speaking freely, openly and frankly lies less in the content of what is said that in how it contributes to the fulfillment of cynical ethos, less in the fact that it involves speaking the truth than in that fact that speaking the truth is a way of testing oneself and one's life. As for the case of Socrates, Foucault's choice of sources and his way of engaging them are striking: The *emph*Apology, the *Alcibiades*, and the *Laches*, all dialogues in which, Foucault insists, the quest for truth, where there is one, is invariably subservient to the project of the care of the self.

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