

Foucault's Ethic of Power

Subjects, politics and the critical attitude

by

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Abstract

Michel Foucault's later work contains the foundations of an 'ethic of power.' This ethic, I suggest, provides an alternative approach to the question of what it means to 'resist' power.

'Relations of power' for Foucault describes an inalienable feature of social interaction. This account continues to cause debate among scholars with diverging views about its critical and political implications. In addressing these concerns I make the point that many of Foucault's critics assume certain interpretations of terms such as 'power' and 'freedom' that locate these criticisms in the very traditions Foucault was attempting to overcome. Consequently, their evaluation of Foucault's critical and political contributions are made from within these same traditions.

Re-reading these concepts in light of his later work on 'government' and on ancient ethics requires a renewed approach to understanding a Foucaultian concept of politics. In turn, this requires a re-thinking of the relationship of ethics to politics and the nature of the political field itself. In disassociating political power from the state, Foucault disrupts the usual alignment between the public and political spheres. By arguing that power relations extend throughout society, Foucault posits the political field as co-extensive with networks of power relations. The subject thus emerges as a constitutive element of the political field. In this way, Foucault posits aesthetic practices of self-stylisation firmly in the domain of politics. In this way, the constitution of the subject takes its place as an integral part of Foucault's idea of politics.

In light of these points, I argue that in understanding what Foucault means by 'resistance' we should look to his account of the 'critical attitude'—the right to qualified refusal of forms of government. This is not to say that resistance to power is limited to this refusal, but that the latter founds resistance to power. As such, an ethic of power would not describe how to exercise power, nor would it determine some exercises of power as 'good' and others as 'bad.' Rather, it would be an ethic that governs how we constitute ourselves as ethical subjects, in relation to ourselves and in relation to others, following the recognition that we are each subjects of, and subject to, power.

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Introduction

In this thesis I outline the conceptual foundations of an ‘ethic of power,’ focusing on how key ideas from Michel Foucault’s late investigations into ancient ethics demonstrate an ongoing concern with political and interpersonal exercises of power. This ethic provides an alternative approach to the question of what it means to ‘resist’ power. It is not an ethic that describes how to exercise power, nor, strictly speaking, does it determine some exercises of power as acceptable and others as not. It is an ethic that governs how we constitute ourselves as ethical subjects, in relation to ourselves and in relation to others, following the recognition that we are each subjects of and subject to power. This ethic arises as part of a renewed approach to Foucault’s idea of politics, the relationship between ethics and politics, and the nature of the political field itself.

A re-thinking of Foucaultian politics is required by re-reading the concepts of ‘power’ and ‘freedom’ in light of his later work on ‘government’ and ancient ethics. Foucault posits such governmental concepts as ‘the state’ and ‘civil society’ as historically and socially contingent phenomena. By arguing that power relations extend throughout society, he posits the political field as co-extensive with networks of power relations. As such, Foucault disrupts the usual alignment between the public and political spheres. In conceiving of the subject as arising within networks of power relations, moreover, the subject emerges as a constitutive element of the political field. In positing aesthetic practices of self-stylisation firmly in the domain of politics, the constitution of the subject takes its place as an integral part of Foucault’s idea of politics. In conclusion, I argue that ‘resistance’ should primarily be understood as referring to the capacity for refusal engendered by the critical attitude.

Foucault’s idea that ‘relations of power’ form an inalienable part of social interaction continues to cause debate among scholars with diverging views about its critical and political implications. His critics have tended to read the ubiquity of power as precluding any possibility of resisting power. This is particularly because Foucault appears to fail to offer a strong normative framework that would render concepts such as ‘freedom’ and ‘resistance’ meaningful. Yet, as these same scholars point out,

Foucault continues to employ such terms in articulating his broader project. Along these lines, Foucault's later work has often been read as addressing these apparent critical shortfalls by re-introducing the ideas of ethics and subjectivity into his philosophical vocabulary.

One of the aims of this thesis, then, is to present a coherent defence of Foucault's project that avoids the well-known problems that arise from Foucault's often inconsistent and sometimes problematic presentation of his views. Particularly, it attempts to demonstrate how the concepts of 'freedom' and 'resistance' are consistent with Foucault's broader project, by pointing out the different ways that Foucault seeks to use these ideas. In doing so, I make the point that many of Foucault's critics assume a certain interpretation of terms such as 'power' and 'freedom' that locate these criticisms in the very traditions Foucault was attempting to overcome. As such, there are inherent problems in attempting to evaluate the contributions of Foucault's project from within these traditions, or by assuming such interpretations. In drawing out an 'ethic of power,' then, I present an account of Foucault's later project that demonstrates the consistency of the ideas of ethics and subjectivity with the work on power.

The discussion straddles the supposed divide between the 'middle' and 'late' periods of Foucault's oeuvre. I use these categories loosely. While there are certainly conceptual developments and re-orientations in Foucault's thinking between these 'stages,' this does not constitute a radical break. Thus one of the secondary aims of the discussion (but which I do not discuss explicitly) is to draw out some of the thematic consistencies between these two stages. Neither is the discussion intended as a comprehensive analysis of either of these stages: as such, it proposes a framework, or groundwork, within which further detailed analysis of Foucault's final years of lectures at the Collège de France might be carried out.

The thesis is divided into six chapters. Chapter One outlines three broad critical perspectives on Foucault's work on power and ethics, providing a critical framework within which the arguments of this thesis rest. It is divided into three parts.

The first part outlines the view that Foucault's account of power fails on ethical and political grounds because it precludes the possibility of a strong normative foundation according to which exercises of power could be assessed as positive or negative, acceptable or unacceptable, legitimate or illegitimate. Although Foucault

refers to the possibility of ‘resistance’ in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* and *The Will to Knowledge*, the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, which gives the impression that Foucault does think that some forms of power are unacceptable, his insistence that this possibility arises *internal* to networks of power renders the term devoid of critical force.

The second part takes up this point in terms of the account of the body implied by Foucault’s description of disciplinary power. This is important because for many critics this account is not only central to the possibility of resisting power, but to the possibility of articulating the political possibilities of Foucault’s work more broadly. For the most part this turns on the extent to which bodies are ‘produced’ or ‘fabricated’ by disciplinary techniques. One of the central issues is whether, in this account, bodies can be described as having ‘depth’ or ‘interiority.’ This is important for several reasons. First, this issue arises in a more general discussion concerning the apparent absence of strong normativity in Foucault’s accounts of power and ethics. It is suggested that should the body be accounted for ‘in itself,’ then it might serve as a foundation for normative concepts that could be used for a transcendent critique of power. Second, because the possibility of resistance tends to be equated with either the extent to which the body can be said to pre-exist or stand ‘outside’ power, or the extent to which it is not constituted by power. A ‘depth’ that could ‘escape’ power could thus found the potential for resistance to power. The corollary argument is that resistance is a normative concept that depends on the body as a bearer of values.

The third part considers three ideas that feature strongly in Foucault’s later work, which he adopts from Antiquity; namely, the reflexive relationship with self [*rapport à soi*], the care of the self, and the ‘arts’ or ‘aesthetics’ of existence. This part takes two broad critical perspectives. First, it outlines the position that Foucault’s insistence on the precedence that care for oneself should take over care for others has negative implications for the spirit of Foucault’s ethics. Particularly that this precedence undermines the ethical authority of ‘the Other’ that should be at the heart of ethics. Second, I briefly outline several issues concerning the ethical and political implications of the place that Foucault gives to aesthetics within his broader conception of ethics. Particularly, that the subsequent emphasis on self-creation and self-stylization renders ethics egoistic and narcissistic: irresponsible and insensible to the needs of others.

Chapter Two provides a broad overview of Foucault's concept of 'relations of power' and 'freedom,' paying particular attention to the conceptual facets according to which an ethic of power would be grounded. It is divided into two parts.

Part One examines two theoretical aspects of Foucault's project, which ground the critical framework through which I examine the concepts of power, freedom and resistance. It has two sections. The first section considers briefly Foucault's archaeological and genealogical approaches, focusing less on their methodological aspects than on their underlying critical commitments. It picks up the threads of Foucault's self-proclaimed hostility to 'the Subject,' foregrounding the argument elaborated in Chapter Three that the Subject he rejects in his earlier works is very different from the ethical self-constituting subject he describes later. The second section takes up Foucault's analysis and idea of 'critique,' which evolves from the archaeo-genealogical approach and genealogy of the modern subject, and culminates in the idea of the 'critical attitude.' This critical attitude is, briefly, a certain way of thinking and behaving in relation to oneself, to others, and to the world that represents a permanently questioning, challenging stance. For Foucault, it forms the foundation of the capacity to challenge the relationship between authority and truth, whereby the subject can call into question particular modes and formations of government.

Part Two provides an overview of the central themes in Foucault's account of power. It has six sections. The first section outlines his analysis of the 'juridico-discursive' model of power, which captures the prevailing assumptions about power many modern analyses implicitly assume.¹ Most obviously, but most significantly, this model turns on the view that power is necessarily negative and repressive. In light of this, I argue that the critical positions outlined in the first part of Chapter One are bound within the very conceptions of power that Foucault was trying to move beyond. As such, Foucault's theoretical and political contributions are undermined. In the next section I provide a brief overview of the idea of 'governmentality,' focussing on how this idea entails the disassociation of political power from the state. This is because Foucault views power as a concrete feature of social interaction, not the corollary product of what are essentially discursive institutions. That is, particular arrangements of power relations given form and meaning through particular discourses and discursive practices. Read in conjunction with Foucault's concept of relations of

power, this requires a renewed approach to understanding the nature of the political field. The third section outlines Foucault's alternative account of power – focussing primarily on the 'analytics' of *The Will to Knowledge* and "The Subject and Power" – within the context of the critical claims outlined in the first part of Chapter One. Namely, whether Foucault's distinctions between power relations, 'domination' and 'violence' form an adequate basis upon which to evaluate power. In providing a preliminary analysis of Foucault's idea that opportunities for resistance should be sought within networks of power relations, I foreground the argument that *rapport à soi* (the reflexive relationship with oneself) introduces a 'permanent limit' to exercises of power.

The fourth section examines Foucault's concept of 'freedom' within the context of his account of power relations. In providing an initial account of freedom as a structural condition of power, I question whether it is able to offer either a meaningful foundation for the notion of resistance, or the basis for a critical evaluation of power. In the next section, however, I draw out his rejection of the ideas of freedom tied to the liberal tradition, which go some way in explaining why Foucault thinks that using freedom to evaluate power is so problematic. Particularly, the characterisation of power as encroaching upon an area of freedom inalienable from the individual misrepresents both the relationship between power and freedom and their respective natures. Moreover, Foucault thinks that such an account of freedom is itself strategically deployed as a governmental technology. I defend Foucault's account by demonstrating how the criticisms outlined in parts one and two of Chapter One tend to lean on conceptions of power and freedom bound within liberalism and the juridico-discursive model of power. This is why Foucault needs to re-formulate the relationship between power and freedom: to limit its use as a technology of government. Finally, I argue that Foucault's own idea of freedom is better understood *relationally*. That is, freedom denotes a relation between people, and as such can be considered as another facet of Foucault's idea of power relations.

Chapter Three is concerned with Foucault's account of 'the subject.' In response to criticisms outlined in Chapter One, I argue that the conclusion that Foucault cannot speak about resistance in a genuine way – because his account does not admit the body as either a bearer of *a priori* values or as endowed with a minimum

¹ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, vol. 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley

strength or agency – relies on the correlation between the body as inextricably located within networks of power and the body as necessarily and entirely determined. The chapter is divided into two parts.

In the first section of part one, I provide a preliminary analysis of ‘the Subject’ of Foucault’s archaeo-genealogical work, in comparison to the idea of subjectivity he adopts later. In doing so, I demonstrate that Foucault’s philosophical commitments regarding the subject remain consistent. In section two, I consider Foucault’s account of the subject in the context of his critical appraisal of humanism. In doing so, I suggest that Foucault turned to ancient ethics in order to aid in his project of restoring power – understood as the capacity for self-constitution – to the subject. In the third section of part one, I argue that Foucault’s concept of disciplinary power presupposes an active *body-subject* that has capacities and skills that arise *internal* to the disciplinary mechanism. In the fourth section, building on the work of Elizabeth Grosz and Paul Patton, I argue that the operation of disciplinary power presupposes subjective experience of disciplinary techniques. This enables an alternative account of the docile body, understood as the body-subject.

In the first section of part two, I turn to Foucault’s idea of the reflexive relationship to self (*rapport à soi*) that forms the foundation of his account of ethical subjects. For Foucault, the four-fold structure of *rapport à soi* describes the modes by which individuals constitute themselves as subjects. In demonstrating the interdependence of these modes of self-constitution with broader social practices, I foreground the argument (developed in Chapters Five and Six) that subjects emerge contemporaneously with the political field. In the final section, I draw on work by Gilles Deleuze and Judith Butler to show how the social relations in which we live are incorporated into the very constitution of the subject. This has important implications not only for the self-reflective and interpretative dimensions of *rapport à soi*, but for addressing certain criticisms of Foucault’s account of ethics. Moreover, Deleuze and Butler’s respective readings of *rapport à soi* support the argument that the body-subject has capacities and skills that arise internal to networks of power, yet which are not entirely determined. As such, this contributes to a meaningful understanding of resistance.

Chapter Four outlines four perspectives on Foucault's broader account of ethics (as referring to *rapport à soi* and the care of the self). The first and second sections examine the ethical implications of Foucault's idea of *rapport à soi* read in conjunction with the theme of the care for the self. Particularly, I examine the ethical implications of Foucault's argument that care for oneself must precede care for others. In doing so, I address the Levinas-inspired criticisms (introduced in part three of Chapter One) that see this argument as indicating a serious lack of ethical regard for others. I argue that rather than bearing upon the spirit of Foucault's account of ethics, his idea that care for oneself must precede care for others is founded on the structural primacy of *rapport à soi*. As such, Foucault's emphasis on the precedence of care for oneself over care for others does not indicate a disregard for the ethical status of others, but rather a practical approach to the ethics of self-constitution that recognizes that the capacity to care for others follows from proper care for oneself.

The third section continues this line of enquiry, in which I consider whether the apparent absence of ethical universalism necessarily precludes a serious ethical orientation towards others. Building on Christopher Cordner's idea of a 'universalism of outlook,' I suggest that *rapport à soi* can in fact form the foundation of such an outlook. Specifically, that the recognition of other people as subjects of, and as subject to, power forms the foundation of an ethic of power. Finally, I turn in the fourth section to the question of whether *rapport à soi* and the associated notion of 'subject-positions' can found a situationally-specific account of social norms. Drawing on Judith Butler's analysis in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, and building on the analysis of *rapport à soi* in Chapter Three, I suggest that contrary to the apparent centrality of the self in an ethics founded on *rapport à soi*, Foucault's account of the latter is founded, partly, on social norms, which save it from claims of egoism.

Chapter Five examines the ethical and aesthetic aspects of the alternative account of politics entailed by Foucault's philosophical commitments regarding 'power.' It is divided into five sections. In the first section, I outline the context of this account in terms of Foucault's return to Antiquity and the search for a renewed ethic of the self. In Foucault's view modernity and Antiquity share a common problem: the practice of liberty. It is in approaching this problem that Foucault thinks that ancient ethics might be useful; that in the decline of traditional moral foundations Antiquity could offer a means of grounding this liberty in an ethics of the self.

In the second section I consider Foucault's comments about his own role as an intellectual and philosopher, suggesting that these reflect – and indeed offer an insight into – certain ideas that Foucault thought we could adopt from the ancient world. On one hand, he ties his own philosophical practice or 'work' to the aesthetic themes he finds in Antiquity, namely, the transformative and creative aspects of exercises of the self. On the other hand, Foucault sees that work as bearing a certain function and responsibility in broader society. Of particular significance is the role that Foucault ascribes to philosophers and intellectuals in relationship to politics. As I point out, this role is tied to Foucault's idea of the critical attitude.

In the third section, I argue that rather than diminishing the ethical importance of others, Foucault's adoption of an aesthetic model provides further depth and meaning to his account of ethics. By examining the problems with the artistic analogy, I further defend Foucault against claims of narcissism and egoism. Finally, I examine the aesthetic model with an explicitly political focus. One of the critiques of Foucault's position in this regard is that aesthetic practices are not politically meaningful because they are essentially private activities. Building on Chapter Two, however, I complicate this reading by demonstrating how Foucault thinks that aesthetic activities are indeed carried out within the political field. This further disrupts the usual alignment of the political with the public domain. This is further supported once we understand Foucault's idea of subjects as discursive phenomena that emerge as part of the political field. As such, self-forming practices are an integral part of a Foucaultian conception of politics.

In the final section of Chapter Five, I consider the extent to which such aesthetic activities, and techniques of the self more broadly, form an adequate basis from which to adopt the critical attitude. In doing so, I turn to the particular significance that Foucault's account has had for feminist scholars. While Foucault's description of 'docile bodies' has on the whole been criticised by feminist scholars, his later work on techniques of the self tend to be viewed more favourably. This is because, as I point out, Foucault's later work pursues avenues for transforming individuals' relations to power, and undermining discipline and normalisation. I examine Foucault's account of ancient dietetic practices, focusing on the contribution that such analyses make toward Foucault's goal of giving form and content to a modern ethic of the self. What is particularly significant, I argue, is that Foucault's analyses lead to the idea that

practices that might otherwise be cast as disciplinary and normalising can be practiced in a *critical* way, thereby undermining their disciplinary and normalising effects.

In the final chapter I offer a framework within which the possibility of a Foucaultian ethic of power can be thought. I describe a relational account of politics, according to which the concepts of freedom, ‘right’ and ‘resistance’ are meaningful by virtue of their place within Foucault’s idea of relations of power. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section outlines what a relational politics might mean. It observes that following Foucault’s de-coupling of political power from the state, and read in conjunction with his emphasis on relations of power, the political field should be re-conceived as extending throughout social organisations in line with relations of power. In doing so, I demonstrate how a certain conception of relationally defined ‘rights’ is consistent with Foucault’s broader philosophical and political commitments. In addition, I point to the significance of the discursive field as the primary site of political contestation. This is because the discursive field is the site of interplay between the epistemic frames and structures of power that govern subject’s self-understanding.

This foregrounds the idea that *parrēsia* – frank or truthful discourse – can be understood in part as the actualisation of the critical attitude. That is, truthful discourse manifests the right to question authority on its relation to truth. In the third section of the chapter, I examine in further detail the idea of the critical attitude and its relationship with aesthetic practices. It is only by understanding the relationship between aesthetic self-formation and the critical attitude that the latter can be saved from an otherwise incontrovertible problem identified by Judith Butler. That is, that in questioning the epistemological and authoritarian foundations of supposed ‘true discourses,’ *parrēsia* requires the subject to suspend precisely that critical relation. The significance of this point lies in its consequences for the political implications and contribution of Foucault’s broader project.

Finally, I conclude the chapter by returning to the idea of ‘resistance.’ In understanding what Foucault means by resistance we should look to his account of the ‘critical attitude’—the right to qualified refusal of forms of government. In doing so, I argue that Foucault shares with Albert Camus a commitment to an idea of ‘refusal’ that forms the foundation of a certain solidarity with other human beings. As such, while it may still fail to meet certain normative criteria as presented in Chapter One,

the idea of refusal as the founding form of resistance allows a meaningful conception of the latter that remains coherent with Foucault's broader project.

In conclusion, I observe that for Foucault the subject is a discursive phenomenon that emerges contemporaneously with the relational fields of power and freedom. In disrupting the usual alignment between the public and political spheres, and by conceiving of power relations as extending throughout society, Foucault posits the political field as co-extensive with networks of power relations. The subject thus emerges as a constitutive element of the political field. As such, the aesthetic practices of self-stylisation that Foucault adopts from Antiquity play a key role in how he conceives of the modern relationship between ethics and politics. In this way, the constitution of the subject takes its place as an integral part of Foucault's idea of politics. In light of these points, I argue that in understanding 'resistance,' we should look to the 'critical attitude'—the right to qualified refusal of given forms of government. This is expressed as a continual refusal, founded in critical practices of the self. Finally, I point to the possibility of an ethic of power founded in the recognition of other people as subjects of, and subject to, power.

Chapter One: Critical perspectives

Introduction

Different threads in recent Foucault scholarship tend to be characterized by their respective approaches to the relationship between the different ‘periods’ of his work. These in turn bear upon the reception of key concepts and themes and therefore upon their critical and political force. There are two broad approaches I am interested in here.

The first approach takes the view that there is a significant, if not radical, break between the work on power (generally taken to represent the ‘middle’ period) and the work on ethics (generally taken to represent the ‘late’ period). It is Foucault’s apparent ‘turn’ to subjectivity in this late work that is especially emblematic of this break. That is, that Foucault moves from an account of individuals as products of power regimes to an account of the actively self-constituting ethical subject.

Regardless of whether such a break is assumed, however, Foucault’s readers tend to agree on the possibility of renewed political opportunities arising from the later work. This approach takes the themes and concepts of the late work to present an opportunity for re-reading and re-interpreting earlier ideas. Through a deeper understanding of Foucault’s later philosophical projects, earlier ideas might be re-thought and take on new meaning.² The predominance of ethical and subjective themes – for example, Foucault’s claim that he had always been interested in ‘the subject’ – has led readers to retrospectively draw out the threads of Foucault’s earlier thought on the subject and reconsider its apparent antagonism. His increased emphasis on self-constitution, additionally, has prompted scholars to reconsider whether the bodies featured in *Discipline and Punish* are as docile as previously thought. The publication of Foucault’s lectures at the Collège de France in particular presents a unique opportunity for conducting such a re-reading.³ Indeed, the availability of these

² See, for example, Edward F. McGushin, *Foucault’s Askēsis: An Introduction to the Philosophical Life* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007).

³ Eric Paras, for example, thinks that the publication of these lectures actually requires a general overhaul of interpretation of Foucault’s *oeuvre*. See Paras, *Foucault 2.0: Beyond Power and Knowledge* (New York: Other, 2006).

lectures coincides with a renewed interest in the work on power, of which a fresh consideration has been posited as a political imperative.⁴ Familiar notions of ‘domination,’ ‘discipline,’ and ‘normalization’ might be re-interpreted to offer new insights.

The second approach focuses more on the ethical and aesthetic themes of the later work, which, while accepting the possibility that these offer new avenues of re-interpretation, tend not to assume a radical break. This approach has adopted – both as a question and a possible organizing principle – the idea of philosophy or philosophical work as a guide to and a way of living. This theme, which greatly interested Foucault both philosophically and personally, is discussed not only as an object or idea for investigation, but a possible mode of thinking *through* Foucault’s own work.⁵

This speaks also to its political possibilities. In some feminist Foucault scholarship, for example, there has been a shift away from criticizing Foucault for the apparent absence of language in which to articulate the possibilities for resisting power, to viewing the late Foucault as a useful source of strategies or ways of thinking about ‘transforming,’ ‘creating,’ or *going beyond* what we are, or are told we are. Indeed, some readers and scholars have found reading (and writing about) Foucault’s work to be personally transformative.⁶

This thesis falls within the context of these themes. I focus mainly on Foucault’s work on power and investigations into ethics, taking the view that while there is certainly conceptual development and re-orientation between these ‘stages,’ the late ethical and aesthetic themes are predominantly extensions of the interests already present in the former. In offering the groundwork of an ethic of power, I align

⁴ See, for example, Jeffrey T. Nealon, who re-examines ‘power’ and argues that “we have too hastily abandoned or thought ourselves to have profitably moved beyond Foucault’s midcareer work on power.” In Nealon’s view, recent world events, such as those of 11 September 2001, justify, if not require, renewed examinations of disciplinary power and panoptic surveillance in relation to ethics and subjectivity. *Foucault Beyond Foucault* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 3.

⁵ McGushin, for example, suggests that we “read Foucault’s work as a sort of manual to the art of living philosophically.” *Foucault’s Askēsis*, xi.

⁶ Ladelle McWhorter, for example, describes how her discovery of Foucault enabled the rejection of an identity ascribed to her by society as essentially, and only, queer. She describes her book as more than a critical analysis; in her words it is: “a local political study, a study of the impact of Foucault’s texts at a site of political oppression, at a site that serves as an anchor point for power and that constitutes itself as a locus of resistance and transformation.” *Bodies*

the thesis both with those readers who see the political possibilities of a re-interpretation of ‘power’ and with those who seek out the possibilities for personal transformation and ways of living, which is itself both an ethical and political project. As such, I attempt to bridge any gaps between these approaches, most notably by addressing certain critiques that try to undermine the political possibilities both of the work on power (by claiming that the absence of strong normativity precludes any theoretical or practical opportunities), and by defending Foucault against certain interpretations of his ethics as essentially egoistic (by claiming that his emphasis on care of the self over care for others renders others as secondary ethical concerns).

This chapter outlines three critical perspectives on Foucault’s later work on ethics, and his work on power as it pertains to the former. It is by no means a comprehensive survey or analysis of late-Foucault scholarship; rather, it provides a critical framework in which this thesis rests and against which the central arguments of this thesis are positioned.

The first section outlines the position that Foucault fails to provide a basis on which to distinguish between ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ forms or exercises of power. This position presupposes that some forms of power, if not all, are negative and ought to be rejected. The failure is partly a result of Foucault’s methodological approach, which describes how power has been exercised in specific historical contexts, abstracting from this an ‘account’ of power in general, without assessing whether such instances are acceptable or legitimate, or not. Yet, Foucault’s invocation of the notion of ‘resistance’ seems to imply that some forms or exercises of power are objectionable, in order to make a call to resistance meaningful. This call, however, is incoherent without a strong normative foundation upon which to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate exercises of power.

The second section outlines similar critiques of the account of the body implied by *Discipline and Punish*. This focuses on Foucault’s idea of the ‘docile body,’ arguing that the body as it appears here is unable to provide a basis for the sort of strong normativity required by the position outlined above. This position holds that the body could only serve as such a foundation if it can be accounted for independently of networks of power; that is, if it is not entirely constituted by them. Thus, the question

becomes whether, for Foucault, bodies *are* entirely constituted. This is important because it provides partial context to the arguments presented in chapters two and three: namely, that while the bodies that Foucault describes cannot be a source of normative values – because there is no body *in itself* external to or independent of networks of power – Foucault’s account of the *body-subject* goes part of the way in providing a source of meaning for the notion of resistance, even if it does not meet stringent normative criteria.

The third section examines critiques that focus on either the spirit of Foucault’s descriptions of ethics and the care of the self – that is, what makes the accounts meaningful from an ethical or moral perspective – or on certain structural or methodological elements of these accounts. In the former case, these critiques tend to focus on the implications of an ethics that appears to over-emphasize the ethical importance of the ‘self.’ Methodological criticisms – of the late work at least – tend to focus on Foucault’s use and interpretation of ancient philosophy. These particular criticisms are not examined in detail in this thesis, because the arguments presented here assume that the objectives and relative success, or not, of Foucault’s project do not turn on the historical or philosophical accuracy of his interpretations.

Forms of power: normative foundations

Foucault’s methodological approach (which can be described as ‘archaeo-genealogical,’ as I discuss briefly in Chapter Two) to analyzing power forms the basis of the criticism that he is unable to articulate a meaningful notion of resistance to power, which gives way to a more general claim about the lack of potential for transcendent critique and political engagement. Jürgen Habermas, for example, suggests that underlying Foucault’s genealogical and historiographical method is an attempt to provide a purely descriptive account of power, and thus to circumvent any evaluative or prescriptive elements. This method, according to Habermas, “brackets normative validity claims as well as claims to propositional truth and abstains from the question of whether some discourse and power formations could be more legitimate than others.”⁷ Foucault certainly appears to avoid making any political or moral judgements about specific instances of power (at least in his published works). Foucault thinks that the *a priori* norms and values that such judgements would require

are themselves the products or effects of specific historical mechanisms of power that posit such concepts as universal and absolute, while effectively masking their contingency upon the arrangements of power that produced them. As such, the use of polarities such as 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' exercises of power are part of a humanist critique that has already fallen prey to normalising and disciplinary power regimes. In Habermas' reading of Foucault, "Humanist critique...is in danger...of merely strengthening a humanism that has been brought down from heaven to earth and has become a normalizing form of violence."⁸ In Foucault's view, the deployment of normalised concepts such as 'man' and 'agency,' far from safeguarding our aspirations and possibilities for human flourishing, quash those possibilities by limiting us to a certain conception or 'truth' of ourselves that is far from necessary.

The pervasive and all-encompassing nature of power described in *Discipline and Punish* and *The Will to Knowledge* appears to preclude any characterization of counter-power as resistance or confrontation, or any characterization with a normative pull. Habermas asks "But if it is just a matter of mobilizing counter-power, of strategic battles and wily confrontations, why should we muster any resistance at all against this all-pervasive power circulating in the bloodstream of the body of modern society, instead of just adapting ourselves to it?"⁹ 'Resistance' connotes a normative sense that is not captured in the idea of different exercises of power or force relations coming up against each other: of countering power through just another exercise of power. Habermas' point is that a call for resistance makes no sense outside of such a normative framework; that the very notion of resistance indicates that some forms of power ought to be resisted, and are therefore illegitimate. Charles Taylor, similarly, argues that the terms 'power' and 'domination' only make sense if juxtaposed against some concept of human agency as constrained or limited: "Nevertheless, the notion of power or domination requires some notion of constraint imposed on someone by a process in some way related to human agency. Otherwise the term loses all meaning."¹⁰ The very possibility of a transcendent critique of power seems impossible under this reading.

⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1987), 282.

⁸ Ibid., 283.

⁹ Ibid., 283-284.

¹⁰ Charles Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," in *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Couzens Hoy (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 90.

Yet Habermas points out that in reading Foucault we cannot help but encounter elements of the normative language games that he rejected, which demonstrate that “(t)he asymmetric relationship between powerholders and those subject to power, as well as the reifying effect of technologies of power, which violate the moral and bodily integrity of subjects capable of speech and action, are objectionable for Foucault, too.”¹¹ Like Habermas, Nancy Fraser criticizes Foucault for continuing to utilise the same ‘humanist rhetoric’ that he is attempting to undermine.¹² Both Habermas and Fraser think that Foucault *does* question whether some power formations could be more legitimate or preferable than others. Fraser draws on Foucault’s later distinctions between ‘power,’ ‘violence’ and ‘domination’ to demonstrate this point:

Foucault calls in no uncertain terms for resistance to domination. But why? Why is struggle preferable to submission? Why ought domination to be resisted? Only with the introduction of some normative notions of some kind could Foucault begin to answer such questions. Only with the introduction of normative notions could he begin to tell us what is wrong with the modern power/knowledge regime and why we ought to oppose it.¹³

Although Fraser takes these distinctions as evidence that Foucault does find the question of whether some forms of power should be resisted meaningful, for Fraser these distinctions are in themselves insufficient to provide the sort of normative basis that would make the notion of resistance meaningful. As I discuss in detail in Chapter Two, in late interviews and texts Foucault delimits relations of power (or ‘government’) from what he calls ‘states of domination,’ with a corollary definition of violence. These delineations, however, are imprecise and turn on a non-normative conception of ‘freedom.’ This does little to meet the requirement for normatively categorized forms of power, which for Fraser must prefigure any meaningful notion of

¹¹ Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 284.

¹² Fraser cites the following statement by Foucault: “When today one wants to object in some way to the disciplines and all the effects of power and knowledge that are linked to them, what is it that one does, concretely, in real life [...] if not precisely appeal to this canon of right, this famous, formal right, that is said to be bourgeois, and which in reality is the right of sovereignty?” in “Two Lectures” in *Power/Knowledge*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon et al. (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980), 108.

¹³ Nancy Fraser, “Foucault on Modern Power: Empirical Insights and Normative Confusions,” in *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), 29.

resistance. That is, there must be either criteria on which to evaluate an exercise of power and determine its legitimacy or illegitimacy – such as the notion of ‘consent’ that features in other theories of power – or categories or types of power that are identified *a priori* as legitimate or illegitimate prior to any actual exercise.

Critics in the humanist vein presuppose the legitimacy of humanist ideals and normative values as the basis for their critiques of Foucault. But Foucault rejects such ideals precisely because they are dangerously prone to deployment, sometimes inadvertently, to normalizing and disciplining ends. Of course, for Foucault discipline and normalization are not always bad. The real problem and insidiousness in the operation of the humanist ideal is that it does not always appear as such: it masks itself in the guise of a liberating conception of humanity. Fraser acknowledges this point when she argues that just as there is no human nature to appeal to in Foucault, neither can one have recourse to the ‘subject’ as a measure for the evaluation power:

For Foucault, the subject is merely a derivative product of a certain contingent, historically specific set of linguistically infused social practices that inscribe power relations upon bodies. Thus, there is no foundation, in Foucault’s view, for critique oriented around the notions of autonomy, reciprocity, mutual recognition, dignity, and human rights. Indeed, Foucault rejects these humanist ideals as instruments of domination deployed within the current ‘disciplinary power/knowledge regime.’¹⁴

Fraser argues that a critique of power cannot be founded on such notions as autonomy because Foucault’s very account of subjects precludes them from having such inherent qualities. For Fraser, the qualities or attributes associated with a humanist reading of the body or subject could only be a viable normative foundation if these pre-exist or are positioned as external to networks of power, or at the very least ‘escape’ investment by power. She seems to be suggesting that Foucault’s wholesale rejection

¹⁴ Nancy Fraser, “Foucault’s Body Language,” in *Unruly Practices*, 56. Sandra-Lee Bartky makes a similar point: “[If] individuals were wholly constituted by the power/knowledge regime Foucault describes, it would make no sense to speak of resistance to discipline at all. Foucault seems sometimes on the verge of depriving us of a vocabulary in which to conceptualise the nature and meaning of those periodic refusals of control which, just as much as the imposition of control, mark the course of human history.” “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power,” in *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 81.

of humanist ideals is necessarily and unavoidably tied to a conception of power that leaves no room for critique or challenge from within that framework. This implies a more general position that any basis for the evaluation of power would have to be found external to the networks and functions of power; that is in a transcendent critique. Thus for Fraser neither the body nor subject could form an alternative source of evaluation, since for Foucault bodies and subjects are produced by power too. However, while it is true that Foucault would reject ‘humanist ideals’ both as techniques and effects of disciplinary power, his later work on ethics complicates this implied reading of both the ‘body’ and ‘subject’.

If qualities like those listed above can only be associated with a body or subject that is not entirely derived from specific historical and disciplinary mechanisms, this leaves open the question of whether an alternative reading of body-subjects as not entirely contingent might be an acceptable basis upon which to evaluate forms of power. Although the normative critique might allow the attributes listed above to be ascribed to a Foucaultian body-subject if this was shown to be the case, Foucault would still reject the use of these qualities if they were defined and ascribed *a priori*. (I return to this question in the next section.)

By linking Foucault’s rejection of these ideals with this reading of the contingent subject, Fraser leaves open the question of whether his later account of self-constituting subjects allows normative notions such as autonomy to resurface. This view presupposes that body-subjects can only be a source of resistance if *not* entirely constituted by social practices and power relations. For Fraser and Habermas, the critical question is whether a proposed source of evaluating power qualifies as a strong *a priori normative* foundation or not. The issue is that within Foucault’s account there is evidence that some exercises or forms of power *are* to be rejected, yet at the same time Foucault fails to establish any normative foundation on which to identify those forms that ought to be rejected from those that ought not.

To return to the central problem as posed by Habermas and Fraser, it *is* the case that in Foucault’s later work many exercises of power appear to be far from objectionable, and that some may even be described as desirable. I argue this point, suggesting that Foucault’s descriptions of ethics as *rapport à soi* and the care of the self presuppose that exercises of power are not restricted to repression and coercion as the positions outlined in this section assume. Indeed, Foucault’s move to using the language of ‘government’ rather than power is evidence of this view. His invocation

of ‘liberty,’ furthermore, provides weight to the distinction between relations of power and states of domination and clearly illustrates Foucault’s commitment to demonstrating that some exercises of power are reasonable, while others are not. As John Ransom points out, Foucault does not think that exercises of power are *a priori* objectionable and therefore inadmissible on normative grounds,¹⁵ so the task is to identify the grounds on which Foucault would claim that an exercise or instance of power *is* objectionable. The distinctions noted above provide the starting point for this task and there is some scholarship already directed to this aim. As Barry Hindess points out, for example, it is the distinction between power and domination in particular that allows Foucault to denounce some power arrangements as states of domination and therefore as unacceptable.¹⁶

As Ransom’s comment makes clear, however, the position held by Fraser and Habermas require *a priori* universal normative standards, by which to reject *a priori* certain forms or exercises of power. This thesis does not attempt to argue that there is an *a priori* or universal basis for evaluating power. Instead, it argues that the absence of *a priori* grounds does not mean that there is *no* basis upon which to evaluate instances and exercises of power. Even if, as Charles Taylor asserts, “there is no order of human life, or way we are, or human nature, that one can appeal to in order to judge or evaluate between ways of life,”¹⁷ it does not follow that all is permitted, or that there is *no* way to distinguish between forms of life or exercises of power. In Chapter Two I argue that in addition to the broad distinctions already noted above, it is the *body-subject* – rather than the body *simpliciter* or ‘the subject’ *per se* – that provides further weight to the argument that Foucault’s account does provide a basis to evaluate power.

Resisting bodies

Continuing along similar lines to those of the previous section, here I outline three particular critical perspectives on the characterization of the body as implied by Foucault’s account of disciplinary power. The stakes of these perspectives are much the same as outlined in the first section: namely, the extent to which both the

¹⁵ John S. Ransom, *Foucault’s Discipline: The Politics of Subjectivity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 107.

¹⁶ Barry Hindess, “Discipline and Cherish: Foucault on Power, Domination and Government” in *Discourses of Power: From Hobbes to Foucault* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 104.

possibility of a critical evaluation of power and the concrete opportunities for resistance are enabled or precluded by this characterization. The first perspective takes the view that Foucault's description of disciplinary power posits bodies as completely fabricated, which leads to the conclusion that there is no body *simpliciter* that pre-exists relations of power and which therefore precludes a normative evaluation and the possibility of resistance. The second perspective complicates this reading, holding that while Foucault's account may *appear* to lead to such conclusions, this misunderstands the true operation of disciplinary power, which, when conceived in terms of inscription, actually posits bodies as external to relations of power. Although this view appears to then open up the possibility for a normative evaluation, it causes further problems by rendering Foucault's accounts of power as internally incoherent. Finally, I turn to more sympathetic readings of Foucault's 'docile bodies,' which argue *contra* the previous positions that disciplinary power presupposes an account of bodies as imbued with certain capacities and powers.

Discipline and Punish describes the way in which disciplinary power, which Foucault thinks characterizes our modern societies, 'fabricates' individuals.¹⁸ The body's forces, capacities and strengths are deployed as instruments in this fabrication, through which the mechanisms of disciplinary power 'produce' docile body-subjects.¹⁹ Under this account (which I explore in more detail in Chapter Three), 'bodies' can be read as completely fabricated within the disciplinary machine. Foucault's emphasis on the *production* of bodies under this model means that bodies cannot be accounted for as pre-existing or 'outside' the disciplinary regime. Foucault's emphasis in *The Will to Knowledge* on the impossibility of standing outside networks of power relations supports this reading.

The subsequent impossibility of accounting for bodies *in themselves*, in this view, precludes the body from being a source of resistance, and even as a source of a normative evaluation of power. Nancy Fraser takes this view, arguing that under Foucault's account of disciplinary power, "the notion of the body *simpliciter*, as a substratum prior to power, upon which power inscribes its figures, drops out of the picture altogether. That sort of body would be merely another version of the *Ding-an-sich*, since it can never be encountered and has no identifiable properties

¹⁷ Charles Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," 93.

¹⁸ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 217.

whatsoever.”²⁰ She is critical of Foucault because he fails to provide an account of bodies independent of their investment by relations of power. In order to posit them as a source of resistance, Foucault must provide an account of bodies “as they really are in themselves.”²¹ Foucault can provide neither an account of the body’s strengths, capacities or potential prior to their manipulation by disciplinary techniques, and by which individuals might resist power’s hold, nor a description of the body as a bearer of values.

This latter point has been the focus of another angle of attack. Another function of discipline is to create the appearance of depth, of interiority. Indeed, Foucault thinks that this is one of its mechanisms: individuals inscribe in themselves the panoptic gaze, which takes its otherwise external application to new depths.²² In one of his most well-known (and now perhaps slightly cliché) phrases, Foucault describes the ‘soul’ that ‘inhabits’ the body to be a mechanism of power that gives the appearance of an internality or depth, further imprisoning the body.²³ In this way, Foucault appears to conceive the body as merely surface: any depth or interiority is merely an effect of external power relations. As David Michael Levin describes it, “the body is merely a surface for the inscription of social order, a material substratum for the application and imposition of power, the power in socially controlled meaning.”²⁴ Without depth, it is argued, there is nothing that might ‘escape’ power. Resistance, according to Levin, cannot be located in a body that is merely an “object produced by historical forces.”²⁵ This is because a body which is merely the product of a certain historical arrangement of power cannot be a bearer of values: bodies are objects produced entirely by heteronomous forces and are therefore “without ‘subjectivity.’”²⁶

In conceiving the body as merely surface, as merely a material object and product of historical processes and power, Foucault fails to provide normative grounds on which to evaluate the processes that constitute it. As Levin argues:

¹⁹ See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, especially 135-141.

²⁰ Fraser, “Foucault’s Body-Language,” 61.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

²² See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 202-203.

²³ Foucault states: “The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body.” *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁴ David Michael Levin, “The Embodiment of the Categorical Imperative: Kafka, Foucault, Benjamin, Adorno and Levinas,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 27 no.4 (2001): 5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 5

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

[T]his conception, consigning the body to a mute materiality, does not permit him to articulate any praxis of resistance to these historical processes [which constitute the body]; nor does it even permit him to speak of these processes *as* processes of subjugation, since this is a normative interpretation which must implicitly assume that the body is a source and medium of values and ideals *not* completely conditioned by history.²⁷

For Levin, Foucault's account of disciplinary power and docile bodies has two significant consequences, which are both of concern to the arguments presented here: Foucault can provide neither practical strategies for resisting power, nor any basis for a normative critique by which some exercises of power might be described as unacceptable. I return to these points in conclusion below.

Judith Butler complicates this line of reasoning. Although Foucault's account certainly appears to posit the body as the product-effect of disciplinary power, this is based on a misunderstanding of how disciplinary mechanisms actually operate. Butler argues that while Foucault's account appears to posit bodies as constituted within a network of power relations, "his theory nevertheless [...] conceives the body as a surface of and a set of subterranean 'forces' that are, indeed, repressed and transmuted by a mechanism of cultural construction external to that body."²⁸ In Butler's view, the disciplinary mechanisms that Foucault describes actually operate as a form of inscription, which posits the body as *external to* those mechanisms. Butler writes: "Although Foucault appears to argue that the body does not exist outside the terms of its cultural inscription, it seems that the very mechanism of 'inscription' implies a power that is necessarily external to the body itself."²⁹ Following Nietzsche, Butler suggests that history as inscription destroys the body in order to produce cultural

²⁷ Ibid., 5. Levin's rejection of Foucault's account of the body as providing a source of resistance is two-fold: because without 'depth' there is no part of the body that escapes power (which he considers a condition for the possibility of resistance); that a notion of 'depth' is required in order to conceive of the embodiment of moral law, which would provide the values and standards required to distinguish between forms of power, whereby the body becomes a foundation for normative evaluations.

²⁸ Judith Butler, "Foucault and the Paradox of Bodily Inscriptions," in *The Journal of Philosophy* 86, no. 11 (November 1989), 602.

²⁹ Butler, "Foucault and the Paradox of Bodily Inscriptions," 603. According to Butler: "the cultural construction of the body is effected through the figuration of 'history' as a writing instrument that produces cultural significations—language—through the disfiguration and distortion of the body, where the body is figured as a ready surface or blank page available for inscription."

signification: “If the creation of values, that signifying practice of history, requires the destruction of the body, much as the instrument of torture in Kafka’s *Penal Colony* destroys the body on which it writes, then there must be a body prior to that inscription, stable and self-identical, subject to and capable of that sacrificial destruction.”³⁰

Disciplinary mechanisms should thus be characterized not in terms of internalization, but inscription. Butler thus re-reads Foucault’s comments about the deployment of the soul: “The figure of the interior soul understood as ‘within’ the body is produced through its inscription *on* the body; indeed, the soul is inscribed on the surface, a signification that produces on the flesh the illusion of an ineffable depth.”³¹ She goes on:

Indeed, the soul requires the body for its signification, and requires also that the body signify its own limit and depth through corporeal means. Furthermore, the body must signify in a way that conceals the very fact of that signifying, indeed that makes that signifying practice appear only as its reified ‘effect,’ that is, as the ontological necessity of a defining and immaterial internality and depth.³²

In this way, discipline creates the appearance of an internality or interiority. The body bears the marks and signs of the relations of power in which it is situated – the cultural significations of position, relationships, identity – which are supposed to be the expressions of an inner self, inner being, but which are defined by exteriority. Disciplinary power – or the rules or norms against which the individual is disciplined – is therefore written upon the body. Described another way, using earlier Foucaultian terms, disciplinary power fixes the somatic singularity with a particular subject-position, producing the ‘individual’ who possesses an apparently prior inner depth.³³ This gives the appearance of internalization. Butler goes on: “In this sense, then, the soul is a surface signification that contests and displaces the inner/outer distinction

³⁰ Ibid., 604.

³¹ Ibid., 605.

³² Ibid., 605-6.

³³ See Foucault, *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the Collège de France 1973 – 1974*, ed. Jacques Lagrange, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2008), 55.

itself, a figure of interior psychic space inscribed *on* the body as a social signification that perpetually conceals itself as such.”³⁴

Elsewhere, Butler makes a similar point with regards to the operation of disciplinary power; she suggests that ‘incorporation,’ rather than ‘internalization,’ better describes its mechanism.³⁵ That which is signified through the deployment of the inner/outer distinction is signified through incorporation, rather than internalization. That is, the sign is applied to the body, adopted by it as part of itself, yet reveals itself as the external expression of an interiority. Butler takes the example of law applied to the body: “That Law is not literally internalized, but incorporated, with the consequence that bodies are produced which signify that law on and through the body; there the law is manifest as the essence of their selves, the meaning of their soul, their conscience, the law of their desire. In effect, the law is at once fully manifest and fully latent, for it never appears as external to the bodies it subjects and subjectivates.”³⁶ For Butler this means that contrary to Foucault’s claim, bodies are not entirely ‘produced’. That is, while the normalized body-subjects that signify interiority – resulting in the perception of externality as expressing inner identity – *are* contingent, the mechanism that Foucault describes actually allows a conception of the body *in itself*.

Turning to more sympathetic readings, the question arises as to whether, if an alternative characterization of the body can be found in Foucault’s account of disciplinary power, this might re-open the possibility not only of a praxis of resistance, but some form of non-normative or quasi-normative (in a different sense than that required by Habermas et. al., however) foundation from which to critically evaluate power. In contrast to the general position that Foucault’s description of disciplinary power entirely fabricates bodies, it can be argued that the very conception of ‘docile bodies’ is actually predicated on the assumption that the body has certain forces or capacities which can be disciplined. In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault writes clearly of the body’s ‘forces,’ ‘aptitudes,’ and ‘capacities.’³⁷ Some scholars have read into these passages evidence that Foucault does indeed conceive of the body as endowed

³⁴ Butler, “Foucault and the Paradox of Bodily Inscriptions,” 606.

³⁵ See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), especially 170-171.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 171.

³⁷ See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, especially 135-141 and 221.

with some ‘power’ or ‘force.’³⁸ As such, their manipulation as instruments in the exercise of disciplinary power is only one possible outcome: they might also be deployed by the individual herself to various ends. As such, these forces can even provide a source of resistance. Disciplinary power renders the body’s forces docile in order to ensure its own efficacy and in order to fabricate the individual. If power relations as inscribed with the very possibility of resistance, then insofar as the operation of power is a disciplinary *relation* these capacities might well give rise to recalcitrance. I discuss this further in Chapter Three.

A potential problem arises, however, if the recognition of such capacities places the body, or at least the capacities themselves, as ‘outside’ or pre-existing networks of power, which would affirm aspects of Butler’s interpretation. If this was shown to be the case, given Foucault’s insistence that points of resistance can only be located *within* relations and networks of power, his broader account of power would be rendered internally incoherent. The task remains, then, to give an account of these capacities and forces without falling into an essentialism of the body—a conception of the body in itself as it is prior to its entrance into networks of power.

By way of conclusion, let me make the following observations. The implications and questions that result from the first perspective outlined above are as follows: first, there remains the question of whether, as Levin and Fraser argue, Foucault’s failure to account for the body as pre-existing relations of power have the consequences that Levin identifies. Namely, a lack of normative foundation by which to critically evaluate power, according to the values and attributes that such an account would provide, and the inability to articulate any practical means for resisting power. These questions, of course, are closely related to the questions posed in the first part of this chapter. Levin’s view in particular, however, has specifically ethical implications, which come to the fore later in this thesis.

For Levin the claim to interiority is not only important in terms of the above questions, but is essential to the conception of ethical beings that he feels we ought to

³⁸ See, for example, Elizabeth Grosz, “Inscriptions and Body-maps: Representations and the Corporeal,” in *Feminine/Masculine and Representation*, ed. Terry Threadgold and Anne Cranny-Francis (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990): 62-74; Cressida J. Heyes, *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Paul Patton, “Foucault’s Subject of Power,” in *The Later Foucault*, ed. Jeremy Moss (London: Sage, 1998). I discuss each of these scholars’ positions in Chapter Three.

be. While he sees depth as a possible means of escape – that is, the means of resisting the imposition of power through withdrawal – more importantly he thinks that the absence of interiority precludes the embodiment of a moral order. That is, without a conception of a ‘deep body’ there can be “no rudimentary moral predispositions, no inscription of the moral law safely hidden within the protection of the flesh.”³⁹ In this view, the ethical status of individuals arises out of a pre-embodied code: an attitude that is prior to any actual interaction that calls for ethical deliberation. For Foucault, however, this is not the case, as we see further on. But it is worthwhile noting the implied question: from where, then, does the ethical status of Foucault’s late subject emerge?

For Butler, the central question that arises is whether the operation of power as inscription entails that the body has an “ontological status” independent of that inscription.⁴⁰ Of course, the answer to this question has far-reaching implications for several aspects of Foucault’s later work. Here, its primary importance is that it might serve as the sort of normative foundation that Habermas et. al. seek, but that Foucault rejected. Should the answer be in the affirmative, Butler’s critique forces Foucault into a normative position. That is, part of Foucault’s rejection of normative foundations is that they deny the extent to which they are produced through various historical mechanisms. If Butler’s reading of the application of power as inscription shows that Foucault falls back in to an account of the body independent of and prior to its construction, then it would appear that Foucault not only failed to describe the operation of power without resorting to normative language, but, more importantly, that the accounts of power in *Discipline and Punish* and the *Will to Knowledge* are internally incoherent.

Both Fraser’s and Levin’s rejections of the body as a site of resistance turn on the understanding that bodies are entirely constituted through power, or as Levin describes it, as merely ‘surface’. In a sense, they are right in suggesting that the body *simpliciter* cannot form the foundation of values and ideas that would qualify as a normative foundation upon which to evaluate power. But they are right for the wrong reasons. For Foucault, bodies are never just bodies; they are always *body-subjects*.

³⁹ Levin, “The embodiment of the categorical imperative,” 6.

⁴⁰ Butler, “Foucault and the Paradox of Bodily Inscriptions,” 603.

In Chapters Two and Three I demonstrate how Foucault's late descriptions of ethics, care of the self and power (and his later account of power as government) presuppose a *body-subject* endowed with certain 'capacities.' I argue, however, that such capacities do not place the body or its capacities prior to or outside the historical processes of its constitution. Rather, the capacities of body-subjects are contingent upon the socially and historically specific relations in which they arise. They are neither an inherent bodily strength or power, nor some form of internality or depth. One of the tasks of this thesis, then, is to illustrate how a non-normative notion of capacities can constitute a source of resistance. Building on the work of Paul Patton, I argue that this account of the body-subject can form the foundation of a meaningful notion of resistance without recourse to the types of normative ideals insisted upon by Habermas and Fraser and that Foucault would find so problematic. Perhaps it is that Foucault – and those who continue in his footsteps – will always be working at cross-purposes to scholars such as Habermas, Fraser and Levin. Indeed, it may be futile to even attempt to reconcile their respective positions. Foucault will always fail to meet the criteria set down by those who desire recognition of ahistorical *a priori* normative claims precisely because he rejects that very framework.

But for Foucault, bodies are never *just bodies*, nor bearers of 'values' as such. They are culturally coded, and culturally and historically contingent. Foucault's own work precludes him from being able to give an account of bodies in themselves. As McWhorter notes, he cannot stand outside the genealogy of bodies in order to define what they *really are*.⁴¹ As I argue in Chapters Two and Three, Foucault's later conceptions of ethics as *rapport à soi* – and, consequently, the relationship between his conceptions of ethics and 'power' – presuppose an account of *body-subjects*. That is, bodies can only be thought of in relation to their social, cultural, historical position, to which the qualities, characteristics and predispositions that we ascribe to it refer. For Foucault it is not only impossible to describe a body *simpliciter*: there is no body *simpliciter*. These ascriptions, I suggest, refer to the subject-position tied to that body.⁴²

⁴¹ McWhorter, *Bodies and Pleasures*, 150.

⁴² In the lecture series of 1973-74, *Psychiatric Power*, Foucault describes the fixation of the subject-function on to the somatic singularity as a mechanism of disciplinary power. See lecture of 21 November 1973, especially 55-6.

The politics of a 'self-centred' ethics

This section essays three significant threads of critical evaluation regarding Foucault's late foray into ethics—understood broadly as including the ideas of *rapport à soi*, the care of the self and the aesthetic practices of self-stylisation. First, Foucault's account of ethics is often seen to be far too focused on the 'self.' This is partly because of the importance he places on the concept of *rapport à soi*: the reflexive relationship with oneself. *Rapport à soi* represents the point of intersection with aspects of his thought; particularly in bringing together his ideas about relations of power and the constitution of subjects. The apparently self-centred nature of his ethical account is only further emphasised by the central place that Foucault gives to the theme of the care for the self, as we see further below. Such critiques generally defer to a Levinasian-style respect for the Other as the yardstick for evaluating the value of Foucault's account of ethics. Closely related to the first, the second critical thread calls into question the centrality that Foucault gives to ancient practices of aesthetic self-stylisation. This is partly because it is seen to further embed Foucault's ethics in a 'culture of the self.' Critical positions taken in regard to this aspect tend to be particularly concerned with Foucault's proposal that ethics conceived in aesthetic terms could form the basis of a modern alternative to traditional moral frameworks. Finally, although it is not a focus of the thesis, I note briefly certain criticisms of Foucault's use of ancient texts. I do so in order to foreground the reasons and objectives behind Foucault's turn to ancient ethics. I note particularly Pierre Hadot's appraisal of Foucault's interpretation of ancient practices of the self.

Among the various criticisms levelled at Foucault's conception of ethics, the common thread is that Foucault focuses far too heavily on the 'self' to the detriment of other aspects of ethics. Particularly, in positing *rapport à soi* as the cornerstone of ethics, Foucault appears to prioritise the relationship with oneself over one's relations with others. As we see in Chapter Three, *rapport à soi* is central to Foucault's re-formulation of 'the subject.' The four-fold structure of *rapport à soi* enables the articulation of a self-constituting ethical subject that remains consistent with the work on power. Part of the problem with this account is that in articulating 'ethics' primarily in reference to *rapport à soi*, Foucault fails to provide a generalised ethical framework within which the responsibility and obligations of the subject can be meaningful. Again, this is partly because an ethics conceived in terms of *rapport à soi* and elaborated through aesthetic practices is seen to lead unavoidably into egoistic and

narcissistic territory. Christopher Cordner, for example, argues that “[The] ethical subject described in Foucault’s later writings is too self-concerned” and that Foucault’s account of ethics “does not sufficiently acknowledge the authority of ‘the other’ in our ethical interaction.”⁴³ But this is also because the subject that Foucault develops through *rapport à soi* emerges as part of the social and political field delimited by relations of power. As such, the subject can be seen neither as the bearer of *a priori* values, nor as bearing a primordial responsibility to others.

His emphasis on the care for the self, moreover, appears to further entrench the possibility of a modern ethic of the self in an egoistic, if not solipsistic, view of ethics. Although much of Foucault’s analyses of this theme emphasise the connections between care for the self and the ability to care for others, the problem is that there is no necessary relationship between the two. This is further complicated by Foucault’s suggestion that care for the self should precede care for others.⁴⁴ As such, while it is clear that care for others can follow from the care for oneself, there is nothing to show that the latter *entails* care for others. In placing the *rapport à soi* as the foundation of ethics (in the absence of traditional foundations which Foucault thinks are waning), Foucault implies that other people do not, or cannot, provide such a foundation. Moreover, as Cordner points out, the result of Foucault’s description of ethics is that care for others only “comes into play through the primacy of one’s *rapport à soi*.”⁴⁵ As we see in more detail in later chapters, this appears to preclude any meaningful account of the subject as morally bound to others.

Arising from this position, too, are questions about the moral responsibility of the subject. Recalling the points made earlier about the fabrication of individuals within regimes of power, the question arises about how it is that subjects so conceived can be the bearers of moral responsibility. That is, given the fabrication of individuals, and given Foucault’s view that care of the self takes precedence over care for others, Foucault is therefore unable to articulate any account of the subject as bearing inherent

⁴³ Christopher Cordner, “Foucault, Ethics and the Other,” (unpublished paper, 2007), 1. Later published as “Foucault, Ethical Self-concern and the Other,” in *Philosophia* 36 (2008), 593-609.

⁴⁴ See Foucault, “The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom: An Interview with Michel Foucault on January 20, 1984,” conducted by Raúl Fornet-Betancourt, Helmut Becker and Alfredo Gomez-Muller, translated by J.D. Gauthier, S.J., in *The Final Foucault*, ed. James Bernauer and David Rasmussen (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1988), 7.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

responsibilities.⁴⁶ These responsibilities pertain not only to other people as the foundation of a meaningful ethics, but those responsibilities that should be inherent in the exercise of power.⁴⁷

As noted above, such critiques tend to presuppose a Levinas-inspired ethical orientation toward others. Broadly speaking, such a view holds that care for others can only be genuine if it reflects a prior normative foundation that posits others at the centre and very *raison d'être* of 'ethics.' For Cordner for example, an account of the relation of self to other must do more than guarantee that others will be cared for by virtue of the care for self. It must posit the other as the source of meaning and the primary objective of ethical behaviour.⁴⁸ In this view, Foucault's account of ethics falls down not only because care of the self is prioritized over care for others, but because these forms of care fail to realize a genuine valuation of the other prior to our social and ethical interaction. The attitude underlying this view seems to be that Foucault's ethical priorities are misdirected: that in positing the care of the self as the *condition* for care for others he was prioritizing the self above all others. It is correct that Foucault prioritized the self insofar as claiming that caring for oneself enabled the *capacity* to care for others: an examination of this idea constituted one of the central themes in the final stage of his work. I argue, however, that this prioritization is *structural* and has little bearing on the *spirit* of Foucault's conception of ethics.

This brings to the fore the second line of evaluation. There are a number of questions about the political implications of Foucault's ethics, given his emphasis not only on *rapport à soi*, but on the aesthetic practices of self-stylisation. The use of 'aesthetics,' particularly a Nietzsche-inspired one, only entrenches the view of Foucault's ethics as ultimately egoistic and narcissistic. This appears particularly dangerous because it suggests that Foucault seeks to completely abandon conventional morality and values. Further, Foucault's emphasis on self-stylisation diminishes others to the status of mere tools in the aesthetic pursuit. As such, an ethic of the self founded in the processes of self-creation or self-stylization appear insufficiently embedded

⁴⁶ Barry Smart queries: "Subjects have the potential to block, change, overturn or reverse the relation of guidance, direction, influence, etc. Is there an implication here that the subject is, in part at least, responsible for his or her own fate, in so far as there is always the potential to transform a relation of power into an adversarial confrontation?" "Foucault, Levinas and the Subject of Responsibility," in *The Later Foucault*, 81.

⁴⁷ Smart asks further: "And what of the responsibilities *intrinsic* to the exercise of power and relations of guidance and direction, the responsibilities which might be argued to be a corollary of actions which structure the field of other possible actions?" [my emphasis]. Ibid.

within social and ethical relationships and fail to respond adequately to social interaction.⁴⁹

Moreover, Foucault undermines the political potential of his account of self-constitution by describing these practices in aesthetic terms. Primarily this is because aesthetic practices are usually seen to be private activities. In this way, while Foucault wants to posit self-constitution as a political activity that challenges given forms of power and self-understanding, he undermines this possibility by locating this process in the 'private' sphere. As such, aesthetic activities are seen to be devoid of real political potential, precluding the possibility that such practices could have political ramifications.

I turn finally to Foucault's interest in Antiquity. Reflecting the importance of ancient philosophy to Foucault's later books and lectures, there are questions regarding the accuracy of Foucault's portrayal and use of ancient sources. While this thesis does not seek to address this aspect of Foucault's work, it is concerned with certain criticisms that bear upon broader issues surrounding his account of ethics. Pierre Hadot argues that Foucault misrepresents the nature of spiritual exercises with the phrase and description of 'techniques of the self.' In Hadot's view, Foucault is "focused far too much on the 'self,' or at least on a specific conception of the self."⁵⁰ The crucial element of this argument is that Foucault does not sufficiently acknowledge that it is the transcendence of the self that is the primary focus of spiritual exercises. For example, the description that Foucault gives of the 'full enjoyment of oneself' (noted above) achieved in the relationship to oneself does not capture the extent to which the self is overcome. The identification of the 'best portion of oneself,' according to Hadot, is simultaneously the transcendence of oneself. Martha Nussbaum thinks that Foucault fails to sufficiently delineate the Hellenist's

⁴⁸ See Cordner, "Foucault, Ethical Self-Concern and the Other," 607.

⁴⁹ Barry Smart, for example, consequently believes that Foucault is not genuinely interested in the interaction between the self and others. Smart claims that "there are in practice few signs in his work of a serious consideration of social interaction, of the interactional contexts in which selves are constituted" and further that it is "through reflection on the moral world of ancient Greece that Foucault reaches the conclusion that there is no necessary link between ethics and other social structures and that we can therefore 'create ourselves.'" See Smart, "Foucault, Levinas and the Subject of Responsibility," 80.

⁵⁰ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 207. Hadot's use of 'spiritual exercises,' as he explains, is intended to encapsulate the various types of exercises that would be illegitimately limited by the use of more narrow terms such as 'ethical exercises' (81-82).

emphasis on *philosophical* practices or techniques of the self, from more general practices of the self, which, according to Nussbaum, the Hellenists shared with broader cultural and religious movements.⁵¹ Central to this delineation is that philosophical practices of self were committed to reason and rationality in regards to oneself, through which the self is freed.

Hadot characterises spiritual exercises as the means for attaining self-realisation. He argues, in contrast to Foucault's characterisation, that self-realisation should not be read as a form of moral aestheticism, whereby these exercises adopt a positive tone as means of 'creating,' 'fabricating,' or positing a style, attitude, or personality. Rather, they are the removal and elimination of extraneous and unnecessary elements of oneself, which allows the true form – already in existence – to appear. It is this 'taking-away' that ties spiritual exercises to freedom; they are the means of releasing us from those aspects of ourselves that cause frustration and unhappiness. In Hadot's words, "It follows that happiness consists in independence, freedom, and autonomy. In other words, happiness is the return to the essential: that which is truly 'ourselves,' and which depends on us."⁵² In stark contrast to Foucault, Hadot thus characterizes spiritual exercises as a return to the self, rather than as the possibility for self-creation and transformation suggested by Foucault. The self, then, is "no longer our egoistic, passionate individuality: it is our *moral* person, open to universality and objectivity, and participating in universal nature or thought."⁵³ Hadot takes as an example Foucault's discussion of writing as a spiritual exercise, in regards to which he argues:

It is [thus] incorrect to speak of 'writing the self': not only is it not the case that one 'writes oneself,' but what is more, it is not the case that writing constitutes the self. Writing, like the other spiritual exercises, *changes the level of the self*, and universalizes it. The miracle of this exercise, carried out in solitude, is that it allows its practitioner to accede to the universality of reason within the confines of space and time.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 5-6.

⁵² Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 102.

⁵³ Ibid., 103.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 210-211.

Spiritual exercises, in this view, are not the means of a positing a relationship to the self whereby the self is fabricated or constituted. Nor are they means of further individualising the subject of the exercise. In contrast to Foucault's reading, spiritual exercises allow individuals to participate in a form of universality.

The differences between Hadot's and Foucault's respective readings extends to significant differences between their conceptions of the role/s of others within spiritual (or otherwise) exercises. For Hadot, the encounter or inclusion of the other occurs through the participation of the ascended self in a form of universality common to that which is other, whereas for Foucault encounters with others are delimited by the individual's practices of self. While Hadot agrees with Foucault's interpretation in regards to the transformative movement or 'conversion' toward the self (constituted by the practices that liberate the self from certain attachments, exteriority, and desires and those that allow self-observation or self-mastery), for Hadot the movement constitutes an elevation of the self:

In this way, one identifies oneself with an 'Other': nature, or universal reason, as it is present within each individual. This implies a radical transformation of perspective, and contains a universalist, cosmic dimension, upon which, it seems to me, M. Foucault did not sufficiently insist.⁵⁵

While his critique is primarily methodological, in the sense that he believes Foucault misinterprets and misrepresents ancient texts, for Hadot this has implications for the value of the resulting account of ethics that Foucault proposes. He suggests that Foucault's misinterpretation of spiritual exercises and his subsequent focus upon the conversion of and care for the self is dangerous: "by defining his ethical model as an aesthetics of existence – M. Foucault is propounding a culture of the self which is *too* aesthetic."⁵⁶ This is particularly significant precisely because Foucault wants to use aspects of ancient ethics as a model for a modern ethic of the self.

Conclusion

In section one of this chapter, I outlined how Foucault fails to provide the sort of normative basis that would render his call to resistance meaningful in the eyes of

⁵⁵ Ibid., 211.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

critics such as Habermas, Fraser and Levin. It is not my aim, however, to defend Foucault on this point by arguing that there are normative foundations to concepts such as resistance: Foucault will always fail in this regard, since he explicitly rejects such a framework. Even if claims to the presence of concepts that might count as quasi-normative, suggested by Paul Patton and Judith Butler for example, are accepted and defended (as they are in Chapters Two and Three), it is unlikely these would suffice as the kind of ‘hard’ *a priori* norms that Habermas et. al. require. As Patton notes of his identification of a ‘thin’ conception of human being in Foucault’s account of the subject and power, such conceptions actually move away from normative standards.⁵⁷

In the second section of this chapter I outlined how the potential for the body to serve as a basis for either a transcendent critique or practical avenues of resistance turns on the question of whether the body is entirely fabricated by disciplinary mechanisms. I suggested, however, that framing the question in this way ignores other possibilities for a meaningful account of resistance. Rather than appealing to an account of the body *simpliciter*, it is the *body-subject* – in conjunction with Foucault’s distinctions between power, freedom and resistance – that provides such a point of departure. In this I draw on the work of Paul Patton, who uses the notion of ‘capacity’ to develop a non-normative standard of human agency by which acceptable and unacceptable forms of power might be identified. In Chapters Two and Three, I develop this claim, illustrating how Foucault’s account of power in *Discipline and Punish* – and his later characterizations of power as government – presuppose a body-subject with certain capacities and abilities, which arises *within* networks of power, thus avoiding a potential internal inconsistency.

The third section outlined three critical points aimed specifically at Foucault’s account of ethics. Each of these points in their own way takes issue with Foucault’s apparent emphasis on the ethical significance of the self over others. In Chapter Four I examine the ethical implications of the roles of *rapport à soi* and the care of the self in more detail. I take up the issue of Foucault’s emphasis on the precedence that care for oneself ought to take over care for others, arguing that this precedence is structural, and has little bearing on the *spirit* of Foucault’s ethics. In Chapter Five I draw out in more detail the political implications of these ideas, focussing particularly on aesthetic

⁵⁷ Paul Patton, “Foucault’s Subject of Power,” 75.

self-stylisation. I challenge the view that aesthetic practices are devoid of political significance, particularly on the basis of the apparently ‘private’ nature of aesthetic activities. I explore the role of aesthetic practices in relation to politics further in Chapter Six, where I note their relationship to the critical attitude. Finally, I considered very briefly criticisms of Foucault’s use and deployment of historical and philosophical texts. I do not address these further in the thesis: I merely note them contextually, as I do not think they bear upon the value and implications of Foucault’s *oeuvre*.

Chapter Two: Resisting ‘power’—foundations of an ethic

Introduction

Foucault’s account of power relations, I argue, provides the foundations for an ‘ethic of power.’ This is not a framework through which specific exercises of power can be described as acceptable or otherwise. It is an ethic that governs the exercise of power in the constitution of ourselves and others as subjects of power.

By way of argument for this position, this chapter has three subordinate aims. First, to provide a critical overview of the central facets of Foucault’s account of power insofar as they pertain to the broader argument at hand. Second, to defend Foucault against the claims outlined in Chapter One, principally, that Foucault fails to provide a basis upon which to critically evaluate exercises of power in order to determine some as good and others as bad. Third, to draw out the threads of the ethical, aesthetic and political themes that are the focus of Foucault’s later work. The chapter is divided into two parts.

Part One examines two theoretical aspects of Foucault’s project, which provide an important part of the critical framework for my examination of ‘power’ and related arguments. It is not an exhaustive account by any means, but draws out the themes and commitments that are consistent across different stages in Foucault’s work. Here I focus on Foucault’s archaeological, genealogical, and critical approaches to the question/s of the relationships between power, ethics, and politics, and the relationship between the subject and truth. It has two sections. The first section considers briefly Foucault’s archaeological and genealogical approaches, focusing less on their methodological aspects than on their underlying critical commitments. It picks up the threads of Foucault’s self-proclaimed hostility to ‘the Subject,’ foregrounding the argument elaborated in Chapter Three that the subject he rejects in his earlier works is very different from the ethical self-constituting subject he describes later. The second section takes up Foucault’s analysis of critique, which, in a natural progression from the archaeo-genealogical approach, evolves into the ‘critical attitude’ underlying his genealogy of the modern subject. This critical attitude is, briefly, a certain way of thinking and behaving in relation to oneself, to others, and to the world that represents

a permanently questioning, challenging stance. For Foucault, it forms the foundation of the capacity to challenge the relationship between authority and truth, whereby the subject can call into question particular modes and formations of government.

Part Two provides an overview of the central themes in Foucault's account of power. It has six sections. The first section outlines Foucault's account of the 'juridico-discursive' model of power, which captures the prevailing assumptions about 'power' most modern analyses implicitly assume. Most obviously, but most significantly, this model turns on the view that power is necessarily negative and repressive. I argue that the critical positions outlined in the first part of Chapter One are bound within the very conceptions of power that Foucault was trying to move beyond. In section two I provide a brief overview of the idea of 'governmentality.' Through his analyses of governmental technologies, Foucault de-couples political power from the state. Further, governmental concepts such as 'the state' and 'civil society' are posited as historically and socially contingent phenomena. In this way, as I discuss further in Chapters Five and Six, Foucault disrupts the usual alignment between the public and political spheres. Read in conjunction with Foucault's concept of 'relations of power,' I foreground the argument that his project thus requires a renewed approach to understanding the nature of the political field.

The third section outlines Foucault's alternative account of power – focussing primarily on the 'analytics' of *The Will to Knowledge* and the essay published as "The Subject and Power" – within the context of the critical claims outlined in the first part of Chapter One. Namely, whether Foucault's distinctions between 'power relations,' 'domination' and 'violence' form an adequate basis upon which to evaluate power. In providing a preliminary analysis of Foucault's idea that opportunities for resistance should be sought within networks of power relations, I foreground the argument that *rapport à soi* (the reflexive relationship with oneself) introduces a 'permanent limit' to exercises of power.

The fourth section examines Foucault's concept of 'freedom' within the context of his account of power relations. Foucault's idea that 'relations of power' form an inalienable part of social interaction continues to cause debate among scholars with diverging views about its critical and political implications. Foucault's critics have tended to read the ubiquity of power as precluding any possibility of resisting power. This is particularly because Foucault appears to fail to offer a strong normative framework that would render concepts such as 'freedom' and 'resistance' meaningful.

In response to these criticisms, I suggest an initial interpretation of freedom as a structural condition of power and question whether this might offer a meaningful foundation for the notion of resistance, or the basis for a critical evaluation of power. After identifying a strong objection to this position, I turn in the next section to Foucault's analysis of freedom in relation to the liberal tradition. In doing so, Foucault's description of freedom as a 'field of possibilities' (which appears initially as a condition of power) appears inconsistent with his rejection of the liberal model. I defend Foucault's account by demonstrating how the criticisms outlined in parts one and two of Chapter One tend to lean on conceptions of power and freedom bound within liberalism and the juridico-discursive model of power. Finally, I argue that Foucault's own idea of freedom is better understood *relationally*. That is, rather than a 'field of possibilities' tied to the individual, freedom refers to a political domain that emerges between subjects of power.

In conclusion I note that the inscription of the possibility of resistance within networks of power requires a re-thinking of what 'resistance' means. It does, in part, refer to the capacity to resist – meaning to prevent, stop or counter specific exercises of power – yet this does not go far enough in capturing its critical element.

Theoretical Frameworks

Archaeology, genealogy, ethics

Foucault's work is often divided into three methodological 'stages' or identified as operating on three methodological planes: the archaeological, genealogical and ethical. As noted in the Introduction, I use these distinctions loosely.⁵⁸ Although they

⁵⁸ There are different views on this of course. Thomas Flynn suggests that the archaeological and genealogical approaches do not exclude each other, but are more like "successive waves breaking on the sand, each is discovered after the fact to have been an implicit interest of the earlier one, for which it served as the moving force." See Flynn, "Foucault's Mapping of History," in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, ed. Gary Gutting (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 28. Béatrice Han argues that "the Foucauldian journey as a whole could [...] be described as the passage from an archaeological interrogation of the *conditions* under which a subject can speak the truth, to the genealogical claim that truth is *per se* the major condition of possibility for the constitution of the self as subject." See Béatrice Han, 'Introduction' in *Foucault's Critical Project: Between the Transcendental and the Historical*, trans. Edward Pile (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 10.

are useful in allowing ease of reference to a particular dominant theme, as indicative of distinct methodologies they are nominal at best. In any case, it is not my intention here to investigate the intricacies of Foucault's method, nor to provide a comprehensive argument for this view. I consider them here in order to draw out certain critical commitments that are important for the broader argument presented here.

'Archaeology' refers to the investigation into what Foucault calls the 'archive,' which is "the mass of things spoken in a culture, presented, valorized, re-used, repeated and transformed. In brief, this whole verbal mass that has been fashioned by men, invested in their techniques and in their institutions and woven into their existence and their history."⁵⁹ Foucault's archaeological method seeks to bring into focus the structures of discourse that have drifted out of view simply because they are so much a part of everyday scenery; as Foucault describes it, "What I'm looking for are not relations that are secret, hidden, more silent or deeper than the consciousness of men. I try on the contrary to define the relations on the very surface of discourse; I attempt to make visible what is invisible only because it's too much on the surface of things."⁶⁰ Foucault admits that the term 'archaeology' might imply a search for 'origins,' but he explicitly rejects such a characterization, stating that it is neither the "discovery of a beginning" nor a "bringing to light of the bones of the past."⁶¹ Foucault's aim is to bring to light the way that knowledge (and history) has been structured by specific, historical discursive conditions. His method, as he describes in reference to *The Order of Things*, is to show how particular historical discursive practices engender specific 'rules' for how objects, concepts, and theories are formed.⁶² The problem of archaeology, then, Foucault poses as "How does it happen that at a given period something could be said and something else has never been said? It is, in a word, the analysis of the historical conditions that account for what one says or of what one rejects, or of what one transforms in the mass of spoken things."⁶³

⁵⁹ Foucault, "The Birth of a World," trans. John Johnston, in *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Lysa Hochroth and John Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996), 66.

⁶⁰ Foucault, "The Archaeology of Knowledge," in *Foucault Live*, 57-58.

⁶¹ Foucault, "The Birth of a World," 65. Cf. "The Archaeology of Knowledge," Ibid., 57.

⁶² Foucault these as "the rules put into operation through a discursive practice at a given moment that explain why a certain thing is seen (or omitted); why it is envisaged under such an aspect and analyzed at such a level; why such a word is employed with such a meaning and in such a sentence." "The Archaeology of Knowledge" in *Foucault Live*, 61.

⁶³ Foucault, "The Birth of a World," 66.

It is Foucault's archaeological approach that gives rise to the famous displacement of 'the Subject' as the foundation of and the principle of organization of knowledge. Indeed, this earlier period of his thought seeks to demonstrate the contingency – that is, the lack of necessity – of the conscious, ordering subject. Such a subject, as Foucault concludes in the final pages of *The Order of Things*, is merely the effect of a particular arrangement of knowledge.⁶⁴ Foucault had argued that the Classical *épistémè* assumed an ahistorical, *a priori* subject, which while not appearing to feature as part of this *épistémè*, as part of the 'table' and order that it sought, nevertheless was the central organizing feature.⁶⁵ Like the absence of the sovereign in Foucault's analysis of *Las Meninas*, man as subject is present and constituted through its very absence: it is the "essential void": "the necessary disappearance of that which is its foundation."⁶⁶ Thus Foucault suggests the problem, but the possibility nonetheless, of analyzing the history of knowledge without beginning with or passing through man as subject.⁶⁷ But, Foucault argues, the space that would be left by the disappearance of man, simultaneous to the death of God as proclaimed by Friedrich Nietzsche, is not a 'void' or 'deficiency'.⁶⁸ Rather, "It is nothing more, and nothing less, than the unfolding of a space in which it is once more possible to think."⁶⁹ By ridding himself of the founding, sovereign subject, Foucault was thus attempting to open a space in which to 'think differently.'

But what really happened to the subject under the exercise of Foucault's archaeological method? After all, he states that the death of man proclaimed in *The*

⁶⁴ Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 422.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 18.

⁶⁷ Foucault, "The Archaeology of Knowledge," 59

⁶⁸ See the famous proclamation by Nietzsche's madman: "'Whither is God?' he cried; 'I will tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers [...] God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.'" *The Gay Science: with a prelude in rhymes and an appendix of songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), § 125, 181. As Milchman and Rosenberg point out, Foucault's work is a response to the continuing cultural crisis – in morality, values, knowledge and truth – that erupted with Nietzsche's claim. See Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg, "The Aesthetic and Ascetic Dimensions of an Ethics of Self-fashioning: Nietzsche and Foucault," in *Parrhesia* 2 (2007), 44.

⁶⁹ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 373. Foucault goes on: "To all those who still wish to talk about man, about his reign or his liberation, to all those who still ask themselves questions about what man is in his essence, to all those who wish to take him as their starting-point in their attempts to reach the truth, to all those who, on the other hand, refer all knowledge back to the truths of man himself, to all those who refuse to formalize without anthropologizing, who refuse to mythologize without demystifying, who refuse to think without immediately

Order of Things is “nothing to get particularly excited about.”⁷⁰ Foucault defends this proclamation, stating that: “I don’t mean by it the death of god but the death of the subject, of the Subject in capital letters, of the subject as origin and foundation of Knowledge (*savoir*), of Freedom, of Language and History.”⁷¹ It is this movement that has been called the ‘decentering of the subject’ (I discuss this further in Chapter Three, with particular reference to the alternative idea of the subject that Foucault proposes). Foucault may have decentred the subject, but he did not rid himself of it completely:

One can say that all of Western civilization has been subjugated, and philosophers have only certified the fact by referring all thought and all truth to consciousness, to the Self, to the Subject. In the rumbling that shakes us today, perhaps we have to recognize the birth of a world where the subject is not one but split, not sovereign but dependent, not an absolute origin but a function ceaselessly modified.⁷²

Indeed, Foucault never stops being interested in the relationship between truth and the subject (without the capital); it forms a central theme in his final years of lectures at the Collège de France, while ‘the subject’ is at the centre of his genealogical investigations. What Foucault seeks to do, following the conclusions of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and *The Order of Things*, is to restore the subject as a concrete, historical artefact: something that is an *effect* of particular arrangements of power/knowledge, rather than the *a priori*, ordering and knowing subject that sits outside history.

Frédéric Gros notes that in the last year of lectures Foucault deliberately juxtaposes his approach to the relation of the subject to truth against the way he had conceived it earlier in terms of archaeology.⁷³ In the opening lecture of this series, Foucault approaches this relationship through an analysis of the conditions whereby a

thinking that it is man who is thinking, to all these warped and twisted forms of reflection we can answer only with a philosophical laugh – which means, to a certain extent, a silent one.”

⁷⁰ Foucault, “The Birth of a World,” 67.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ See Frédéric Gros, “Course Context,” in *The Courage of Truth: the Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), especially 343-345.

subject is manifested – to others and to herself – through acts of truth-telling.⁷⁴ Foucault's focus is on how individuals constitute themselves when they speak the truth. He states:

Rather than analyzing the forms by which a discourse is recognized as true, this would involve analyzing the form in which, in his act of telling the truth, the individual constitutes himself and is constituted by others as a subject of a discourse of truth, the form in which he presents himself to himself and to others as someone who tells the truth, the form of the subject telling the truth.⁷⁵

Whereas the archaeological investigations are concerned with the historical and cultural conditions of the existence of true discourses, in these lectures he is concerned with how a subject's relationship with herself and her relationships with others are dependent upon a specific form of speaking the truth.⁷⁶ This is not, as Gros argues, a study that looks for the conditions that make true discourses valid or not, but which "examines the modes of being which true discourses entail for the subject who uses them."⁷⁷

In the earlier lecture course of 1981-1982, published as *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Foucault describes what he calls the "Cartesian moment," at which self-knowledge was made the primary condition of the subject's access to truth. The significance of this moment for Foucault is that it displaces the ancient precept of care of the self [*epimeleia heautou*] with the imperative to know oneself [*gnōthi seauton*].⁷⁸ Foucault sees this displacement as responsible for the exile of care of the self from philosophy.⁷⁹ Within the broader context of Foucault's archaeological and genealogical investigations, however, this description takes its place as part of

⁷⁴ Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 2-3.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 3.

⁷⁶ Frédéric Gros, "Course Context," in *The Courage of Truth*, 344.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981-1982*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2005), 14-15.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 14. Foucault thus provides the following definition of philosophy: "We will call, if you like, 'philosophy' the form of thought that asks, not of course what is true and what is false, but what determines that there is and can be truth and falsehood and whether or not we can separate the true and the false. We will call 'philosophy' the form of thought that asks what it is that enables the subject to have access to the truth and which attempts to determine the conditions and limits of the subject's access to truth. If we call this 'philosophy,' then I think we could call 'spirituality' the search, practice, and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth." (15)

Foucault's continuing concern with 'knowing man' as the underlying condition of truth. As Gros notes, "In ancient spirituality, the subject can lay claim to the truth on the basis of a transformation of his being, whereas for modern philosophy it is insofar as he is always enlightened by the truth that the subject can claim to change the way he conducts himself."⁸⁰ Thus the attention that Foucault gives to the theme of the care of the self in his last years of work can be seen as re-instituting not only the subject as part of the epistemological field, rather than as its external condition, but the sense in which access to the truth is the result of a transformation in the subject's *rapport à soi*.

This shift in the relationship between the subject and truth is reflected in Foucault's transition to genealogy. Late in his career, when he had begun to investigate the ethical practices of Antiquity, Foucault re-cast his entire project as a genealogy of the modern Western subject. That is, as preoccupied with how, since Antiquity, we have been constituted as subjects not only through techniques of power, but through what Foucault calls 'techniques of the self.' (These are the technologies that "permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality."⁸¹) In one interview, Foucault frames his work on disciplinary power as forming part of a broader overarching project of conducting a genealogy of the Western subject.⁸² But he also simultaneously posits his late investigations into ethical practices as another facet of his general analysis of power: "Having studied the field of power relations taking techniques of domination as a point of departure, I would like, in the years to come, to study power relations starting from the techniques of the self."⁸³ Elsewhere, however, he is more explicit, claiming that his previous work had been less concerned with analyzing the

⁸⁰ Frédéric Gros, "Course Context," in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 522.

⁸¹ Foucault, "Technologies in the Self" in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, Vol. 1 of *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans Robert Hurley et. al. (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 225. In another interview these are referred to as 'techniques' rather than 'technologies,' see "Sexuality and Solitude" in *Ethics*, 177.

⁸² For example, Foucault states: "If one wants to analyze the genealogy of the subject in Western civilization, one must take into account not only techniques of domination but also techniques of the self. One must show the interaction between these types of technique. When I was studying asylums, prisons, and so on, I perhaps insisted too much on the techniques of domination. What we call 'discipline' is something really important in this kind of institution; but it is only one aspect of the art of governing people in our societies." "Sexuality and Solitude" in *Ethics*, 177.

⁸³ Ibid.

phenomena of power than with the “three modes of objectification which transform human beings into subjects,” of which the third – the study of “the way a human being turns himself into a subject” was the theme of his current work.⁸⁴ In light of this, Foucault claims that “it is not power but the subject which is the general theme of my research.”⁸⁵

Foucault wants to show how our modern conceptions of the self and the subject are historical and cultural realities and as such are open to challenge, and to change.⁸⁶ He thus considers this genealogy to be part of the broader political task of conducting a ‘critical ontology of ourselves.’ Foucault states:

Three domains of genealogy are possible. First, a historical ontology of ourselves in relation to truth through which we constitute ourselves as subjects of knowledge; second, a historical ontology of ourselves in relation to a field of power through which we constitute ourselves as subjects acting on others; third, a historical ontology in relation to ethics through which we constitute ourselves as moral agents.⁸⁷

This genealogy aims not to discover or establish “formal structures with universal value,” but to function rather as an investigation to the conditions that have led us to understand ourselves and each other in particular ways.⁸⁸ Foucault thus re-cast his work on power as revealing the historical and cultural contingency of modern conceptions of the self, soul and subject.

Genealogy thus reveals the historical specificity of events and identifies their associated discourses. In doing so it provides another perspective on the archaeological rejection of the Subject. This rejection is in fact a condition of the very possibility of conducting the genealogical project: “One has to dispense with the

⁸⁴ Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in *Critical Inquiry* 8 (Summer, 1982), 777-778. The first part, “Why Study Power? The Question of the Subject,” was written in English by Foucault. The second part, “How is Power Exercised?” trans. Leslie Sawyer. First published as the afterword to Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

⁸⁵ Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” 778.

⁸⁶ See “Sexuality and Solitude,” 177; and “About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Two Lectures at Dartmouth,” in *Political Theory* 21, no. 2, May 1993, 202.

⁸⁷ Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress,” in *The Foucault Reader* (London, Penguin Books, 1991), 351. It is interesting to note here how Foucault characterizes his earlier work on power as concerned with the way subjects exercise power over each other. From the point of view of *Discipline and Punish*, at least, this characterization seems heavily influenced by the concerns of the late work.

⁸⁸ Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” in *Ethics*, 315.

constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself, that's to say, to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework. And this is what I would call genealogy.”⁸⁹ But this does not constitute a complete rejection of the idea of subjects in general; Foucault merely removes ‘the Subject’ as the scaffold upon which epistemologies are constructed. In doing so, Foucault suggests that, “Maybe the problem of the self is not to discover what it is in its positivity, maybe the problem is not to discover a positive self or the positive foundation of the self. Maybe a problem is now to discover that the self is nothing else than the historical correlation of the technology built in our history.”⁹⁰

Corresponding to processes of subjectivation and objectivation, according to Foucault, are ‘techniques’ or ‘technologies.’ These are the matrices of practical reason that human beings use to understand themselves.⁹¹ Foucault claims that there are four, interdependent, types of technology, although it is the final two – the ‘technologies of power’ and the ‘technologies of the self’ – which are of most concern here.⁹² In contrast to technologies of the self, as defined above, are technologies of power, which “determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject.”⁹³ While these respective technologies form a significant part of the content of Foucault’s investigations (especially those techniques of the self derived from Antiquity), they are, as Paul Veyne observes, an important tool in Foucault’s methodological approach in conducting a genealogy of the subject:

[I]nstead of starting out with universals as a grid of intelligibility for ‘concrete practices’ that are both thought about and understood, even if they take place in silence, one takes as one’s starting point those very practices and the singular and bizarre ‘discourse’ that they presuppose, ‘so as to, as it were, pass these universals through the grid of these practices.’⁹⁴

⁸⁹ Foucault, “Truth and Power” in *Power/Knowledge*, 117.

⁹⁰ Foucault, “About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self, 222.

⁹¹ See Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” in *Ethics*, 224-225.

⁹² The other two are: “technologies of production, which permit us to produce, transform, or manipulate things” and “technologies of sign systems, which permit us to use signs, meanings, symbols, or signification.” *Ibid.*, 225.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Paul Veyne, *Foucault: His Thought, His Character*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 17.

In this way, even Foucault's latest enquiries into ancient practices of the self, and the corresponding ethic that Foucault develops, represent a continuation of his earlier intellectual endeavours, inverting the classical epistemological course. The objectives of these late enquiries, however, are somewhat different. As Edward McGushin argues:

His genealogies offer us an understanding of our present situation in terms of the embodied practices through which we are concretely determined as subjects of philosophy, and as disciplinary subjects in general. Furthermore, his historical ontology of our selves as philosophers reveals the way that our contemporary situation is based on a historical neglect – the neglect of the spiritual model of truth and of care of the self.⁹⁵

From this perspective, Foucault's investigations into 'power' can be seen as a genealogical unearthing of the techniques of domination that constitute not only subjects, but the 'individual' and 'man' within disciplinary institutions. The ethical investigations, however, focus on the various manifestations of technologies of the self from Antiquity to modernity. Foucault's goal in this regard is to give an account of how, through ethical techniques that have developed from Antiquity we have directly constituted our identity.⁹⁶ In this way, the genealogy of the subject is simultaneously a genealogy of ethics. That is, Foucault cannot provide an account of how the subject has constituted itself without providing an account of the various techniques and exercises through which this constitution occurs. For Foucault, as we see further below, 'ethics' broadly refers to the various processes and modes by which individuals are constituted as subjects.

So, before turning to Foucault's idea of critique, and then to his analyses of 'power' proper, what implications do the above observations about the archaeo-genealogical enquiries have for the arguments presented here? There is one point that should be especially noted at this stage. If genealogy reveals the conditions by which we come to understand ourselves as certain kinds of subjects who do, act, and think in certain ways, a further step is required in order to develop and crystallize the political

⁹⁵ Edward McGushin, "Foucault and the Problem of the Subject" in *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 31 (5-6), 644.

possibilities this revelation presents.⁹⁷ As Michael Clifford notes, an understanding of the conditions and determining factors of our emergence as subjects can be used ‘tactically’ as a means of resisting our subjection. But this neither necessarily amounts to a condemnation of the underlying power/knowledge networks, nor to a claim about whether such subjection should be resisted.⁹⁸ Neither the genealogical nor ethical aspects of Foucault’s work are intended to prescribe behaviour or indeed to promote certain political views. Yet more needs to be said about how these revelations can be deployed to usefully confront, and possibly undermine, these conditions and associated structures of power/knowledge. It is only through such a deployment that the possibilities of doing, acting, thinking, and *being* otherwise can be realized. From the revelation that the self is nothing more than a correlation of the technologies of our history emerges one of Foucault’s strongest political objectives: a proposal for how we may constitute ourselves as subjects in relative and partial independence from the historical technologies. This is taken up in Chapter Three, where I outline Foucault’s alternative account of the subject, which forms the foundation of how he thinks that we should constitute ourselves.

Critical Attitudes: the politics of truth

It is in the idea of ‘critique’ that the political aspects of Foucault’s genealogy come into their own. In a now well-known and popular text, Foucault describes his project as forming part of a ‘philosophical interrogation’ founded in the Enlightenment.⁹⁹ He is careful to point out that the content of this interrogation is different than the Enlightenment project but thinks that they nonetheless share a similar critical

⁹⁶ Foucault, “The Political Technology of Individuals,” in *Power*, vol. 3 of *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley and others (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 404.

⁹⁷ As Roger Deacon observes, genealogy investigates not only how we are constituted and recognized as subjects, but attempts to determine the possibility of doing, being and thinking otherwise. See Roger Deacon, “Theory as Practice: Foucault’s Concept of Problematization,” in *Telos* 118 (Winter, 2000), 130. [Vol. 31 (115-118) 1999-2000]

⁹⁸ Michael Clifford, *Political Genealogy After Foucault: Savage Identities*, (New York: Routledge, 2001), 157. In Clifford’s words: “Foucault’s object is not to condemn the network of power/knowledge relations; his object is to expose the interplay of determining factors constituting this network as the source of our emergence as subjects, in the sense that the recognition and understanding of their subjection can be used tactically in order to resist it. Whether they will resist it or not is an arbitrary (though not necessarily irrational) choice, and Foucault is adamant in his conviction that his role as an intellectual is not to tell them whether or not they should resist it.”

⁹⁹ Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” 312.

approach: “one that simultaneously problematizes man’s relation to the present, man’s historical mode of being, and the constitution of the self as an autonomous subject.”¹⁰⁰ Foucault suggests that we think about modernity not as a period of history, but as a certain form of *attitude*, which he describes as “a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task. No doubt, a bit like what the Greeks called an *ēthos*.”¹⁰¹ Indeed, it is precisely under this kind of ethos that Foucault’s work is conducted. His work problematizes, marks a way of acting and behaving, and is a form of ‘ascesis’ in the way the Greeks envisaged. I return to these points below.

Methodologically, critique is not entirely distinct from genealogy. Earlier Foucault does distinguish them as different, although not completely distinct, approaches to the analysis of discourse. In his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, he describes the critical task as analyzing the processes of rarefaction, of regrouping, and of the unification of discourses, and the genealogical approach as studying their formation.¹⁰² The critical task here was the analysis of the instances of discursive control.¹⁰³ Later, in ‘What is Enlightenment?’ Foucault describes criticism as genealogical in design and archaeological in method.¹⁰⁴ In this sense, the critical

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. ‘Problematization’ for Foucault refers to the way in which a particular concept is constituted as an object of thought in relation to truth, through both discursive and non-discursive practices. See Foucault, “The Concern for Truth,” in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and other writings 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1988), 257. In this way, problematization brings into play not only the discursive and non-discursive conditions of the concept itself, but of the forms of reflection through which that concept is posited as an object. It is part of Foucault’s methodological approach insofar as it forms a theoretical target: a way of describing a particular historical manifestation of a form of ‘analysis’ that gives rise to certain theories or ideas as a source of recourse to a particular problem. Roger Deacon describes ‘problematization’ as “concerned with how and why, at specific times and under particular circumstances, certain phenomena are questioned, analyzed, classified, and regulated, while others are not.” “Theory as Practice,” 127. Problematization is part of “the specific work of thought.” See Foucault, “Problematics,” in *Foucault Live*, 421.

¹⁰¹ Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” 309.

¹⁰² Foucault, “The Order of Discourse,” trans. Ian McLeod, in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 71.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” 315. He goes on: “Archaeological—and not transcendental—in the sense that it will not seek to identify the universal structures of all knowledge [*connaissance*] or of all possible moral action, but will seek to treat the instances of discourse that articulate what we think, say, and do as so many historical events. And this critique will be genealogical in the sense that it will not deduce from the form of what we are what it is impossible for us to do and to know; but it will separate out, from the contingency

project is “a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying.”¹⁰⁵ But given the conclusions that Foucault draws from his archaeological and genealogical investigations, critique can be seen as a development not so much methodologically, but practically: “it is seeking to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom.”¹⁰⁶ Its true force comes from the way it engages philosophy, through ethics, with politics: “I shall thus characterize the philosophical ethos appropriate to the critical ontology of ourselves as a historico-practical test of the limits we may go beyond, and thus as work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings.”¹⁰⁷ Foucault’s interest in ancient practices of the self is motivated by this imperative, as I examine in later chapters. For Foucault these practices offer modern individuals a model for such a work of freedom.

There are questions, however, about how this approach – and the genealogical method more broadly – can be truly critical and indeed be politically significant if Foucault denies the possibility of transcendent critique. This is essentially the point Habermas is getting at when he states that ‘resistance’ is meaningless because it is always inscribed in existing strategies of power.¹⁰⁸ For Foucault critique is not conducted from ‘outside’ those structures or forms that one seeks to question. It is a lived activity that depends on the recognition of oneself as a concrete, historical reality. As such, I suggest, Foucault’s idea of critique should be thought in terms of a ‘critical attitude.’

For part of the answer to this problem, we can look to Foucault’s definition of thought:

Thought is not what inhabits a certain conduct and gives it its meaning; rather, it is what allows one to step back from this way of acting or reacting, to present it to oneself as an object of thought and question it as to its meaning, its conditions, and its goals. Thought is freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which one

that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think.” (315-316)

¹⁰⁵ Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” 315.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 316.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 283-284

detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem.¹⁰⁹

Thought not only enables critical activity, it is itself an activity and a practice of freedom. As Roger Deacon describes it, “Thought is considered to be not merely a mental, cognitive, speculative, or linguistic phenomenon, but rather, a set of practices in its own right, i.e., a process that participates in the constitution of the objects of which it speaks, and that has specific and identifiable political effects.”¹¹⁰ The possibility of critique is therefore inscribed in our very being and embodiment as historical and cultural realities, which is why it is for Foucault part of the work of freedom. It is, moreover, a work of freedom practiced *within* the networks and frameworks through which we are defined as certain historical and cultural beings.

To further understand the political implications of the critical attitude, I turn now to an earlier lecture Foucault gave called “What is Critique?” in which Foucault characterizes the critical attitude as a mode of response to the problem of government. In this lecture Foucault argues that the sixteenth century saw a rise in the number and force of ‘arts of government’—the techniques used to govern and conduct individuals, families, and groups. (I discuss ‘government’ and ‘governmentality’ in more detail below.) For Foucault, arts and technologies of government give rise to the problem and question of how *not* to be governed; that is, how to respond to these new forms of government and control. In the context of the sixteenth century, Foucault posits the emergence of the critical attitude as contemporaneous with the subsequent recourse to natural law as such a mode of response. The critical attitude is thus concerned with ‘how not to be governed.’ This is not a question of a complete rejection or refusal of government; in the sense that individuals should refuse to be governed at all. It is not a call to complete anarchy or complete autonomy. Rather, it is “a perpetual question which would be: ‘how not to be governed *like that*, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them’ [Foucault’s emphasis].”¹¹¹ In the sixteenth century, then, according to Foucault, it was natural law that formed the foundation of the critical attitude. It was from this basis that the question of how not to be governed

¹⁰⁹ Foucault, “Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations: An Interview with Michel Foucault,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 117.

¹¹⁰ Roger Deacon, “Theory as Practice,” 132.

¹¹¹ Foucault, “What is Critique?” in *The Political: Blackwell Readings in Continental Philosophy*, ed. David Ingram (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2002), 193.

was formulated in terms of its legitimacy: “from this perspective, confronted with government and the obedience it stipulates, critique means putting forth universal and infeasible rights to which every government, whatever it may be, whether a monarch, a magistrate, an educator or a pater familias, will have to submit.”¹¹² Thus Foucault concludes, “Natural law is certainly not an invention of the Renaissance, but from the sixteenth century on, it took on a critical function that it still maintains to this day. To the question ‘how not to be governed?’ it answers by saying: ‘What are the limits of the right to govern?’ Let us say here critique is basically a legal issue.”¹¹³

Thus part of its political enterprise is to call into question the relationship between authority and truth and in this way to pose the possibility of disrupting established orders of knowledge, epistemological frameworks and their corollary structures of power. Foucault complicates the relationship between truth and authority, stating that “‘to not to want to be governed’ is of course not accepting as true [...] what an authority tells you is true, or at least not accepting it because an authority tells you it is true, but rather accepting it only if one considers valid the reasons for doing so. And this time, critique finds its anchoring point in the problem of certainty in its confrontation with authority.”¹¹⁴ Indeed, Foucault poses the practice of critique in the refusal of government to be “akin to the historical practice of revolt, the non-acceptance of a real government.”¹¹⁵ This indicates, then, the starting point for understanding Foucault’s idea of resistance: as beginning in the refusal of a given mode of government, by calling into question the relationship between truth and authority to which it has recourse.

Indeed, it is in this operation of the critical attitude that the significance of ‘critique’ for Foucault’s account of politics begins to become clear. Foucault links the refusal of forms of government with the possibility of ‘desubjugating the subject’:

[I]f governmentalization is indeed this movement through which individuals are subjugated in the reality of a social practice through mechanisms of power that adhere to a truth, well, then! I say that critique is the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid., 193-4.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 194.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 208.

discourses of truth. Well, then!: critique will be the art of voluntary insubordination, that of reflected intractability. Critique would essentially ensure the desubjugation of the subject in the context of what we could call, in a word, the politics of truth.¹¹⁶

The arrangements of power-knowledge linked with particular forms of government, legitimized and normalized by their relation to authority, make intelligible particular formations of subjectivity. As Butler describes it, “To be governed is not only to have a form imposed upon one’s existence, but to be given the terms within which existence will and will not be possible.”¹¹⁷ By calling into question this relationship between authority and truth Foucault thinks that we can disrupt the lines of this intelligibility, and therefore introduce the possibility of understanding ourselves in different ways. For Foucault, as we see further below, this possibility is intimately linked with the possibility of resistance more broadly.

In linking the desubjugation of the subject with the refusal of forms of government, it is clear that Foucault thinks that certain forms of power call for resistance. Yet the role of the critical attitude here is not to provide a transcendent critique of forms of power or government. For Foucault, the critical attitude is linked to the ‘right’ to call authority into question. It points to an activity or stance that must be adopted in order to present the possibility of the subject’s desubjugation. In this way, Foucault places critique at the apex of the axes of truth, power and the subject. He states that “the core of critique is basically made of the bundle of relationships that are tied to one another, or one to the two others, power, truth and the subject.”¹¹⁸ The critical attitude, then, is “a certain way of thinking, speaking and acting, a certain relationship to what exists, to what one knows, to what one does, a relationship to society, to culture and also a relationship to others.”¹¹⁹ Thus Foucault concludes:

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

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 194.

¹¹⁷ Butler, “What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue,” in *The Political*, 220.

¹¹⁸ Foucault, “What is Critique?” 194.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 191.

the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.¹²⁰

The ‘critical attitude’ is essential to how Foucault understands ethics as not only related, but indispensable, to politics. This is because (as I demonstrate in later chapters) the ethical and aesthetic practices of self-constitution are intimately linked with the critical attitude, and therefore the capacity to question authority on its relation to truth.

In the context of the criticisms outlined in Chapter One, then, the critical attitude takes a central role in how Foucault’s concept of ‘resistance’ should be formulated and understood. Yet if the problem of ‘how not to be governed’ is still current today, and assuming that the sixteenth century recourse to natural law fails to answer this problem as it arises now, the question for Foucault, and for the argument presented here, is to what does our own critical attitude have recourse? That is, what is the foundation of our critical attitude today? What form does critique take? I return to these questions in later chapters.

Power: ethical foundations

Beyond the juridico-discursive model

The accounts of ‘power’ that Foucault gives in *Discipline and Punish* and *The Will to Knowledge* each mark an attempt to move beyond traditional theories of power. For Foucault, ‘power’ – short for ‘relations of power’ – should be conceived neither as a simple physical capacity, nor as a capacity attained by right or consent, by which its exercise is legitimized. Neither should it be characterised merely in repressive terms. In this section I introduce Foucault’s account of power relations by outlining those traditional ideas about power that Foucault wants to dispel. In doing so, I argue that many of the criticisms outlined in parts one and two of Chapter One maintain certain assumptions and ideas about power of the very sort that Foucault was trying to overcome.

In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault explicitly posed his ‘analytics’ of power in contrast to what he calls the ‘juridico-discursive’

¹²⁰ Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” 319.

representation of power, which he sees as embedded in political analyses of power throughout the history of the West.¹²¹ For Foucault, this is a theory of power defined by its essentially negative and prohibitive character. In this way, it presupposes a legalistic binary structure of acts as legal or illegal, licit or illicit, permitted or forbidden.¹²² This structure operates as a framework of intelligibility through which acts are interpreted and evaluated, according to their relationship to and place within this binary system. It is through language that this power functions: discourse is a mechanism that articulates and sets down the relation of acts to this binary structure. As such it sets up an opposition between power and the subject: subjects are defined in a relation of obedience to legislative power.

What puzzles Foucault is why such a model – which for him is clearly deficient in its account of how power actually operates and clearly ignores other formations and mechanisms – should continue to pervade modern ideas about power. He suggests that the juridico-discursive model is so successful precisely because power masks its own operation: “power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms.”¹²³ For Foucault, the ingenuity in its success lies in its recourse to ‘freedom.’ That is, following the tradition of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, power is posed as the opposite of freedom and as the legitimate limit placed on individual liberty. Foucault argues that “Power as a pure limit set on freedom is, at least in our society, the general form of its acceptability.”¹²⁴ In this way, the juridico-discursive model leans on a representation of the effects of power as either, on the one hand, promising the possibility of liberation (by characterizing power as taking hold of something prior to it, therefore positing the possibility of its release), or, on the other hand, as constitutive of that which it appears to repress (and therefore presenting no alternative).¹²⁵ That is, Foucault thinks that the very idea that the only alternative to a repressive model of power is that power must therefore be all-constitutive, and therefore inescapable, is itself a mechanism of the juridico-discursive model.

¹²¹ See Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 82-83.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 83-85.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ Foucault describes this as a “common representation of power which, depending on the use made of it and the position it is accorded with respect to desire, leads to two contrary results: either to the promise of a ‘liberation,’ if power is seen as having only an external hold on desire, or, if it is constitutive of desire itself, to the affirmation: you are always-already trapped.” *Ibid.*, 83.

It is particularly this characterization of power that appears to be the target of the criticisms made by Habermas et. al., as outlined in Chapter One. For example, the view that the apparently all-pervasive nature of Foucault's account of power means that there is no escaping power, and thereby precludes the possibility of resistance. As already noted above, this is founded on the idea that the possibility of resistance can only be sought in a concept of the subject or body as pre-existing or independent of power relations. The view that a rejection of such concepts necessarily precludes the possibility of resistance to power results in one of the two effects of the juridico-discursive model that Foucault identifies: namely, that one is always-already 'trapped' by power. Habermas et. al. seem to prefer the alternative: that, given a subject or body that is conceived of as independent of power relations, there is only to release power's hold and so liberate the individual. In this way, views such as those held by Habermas, Fraser and Taylor presuppose certain conceptions of power and freedom of the very sort that Foucault was attempting to overcome.¹²⁶ Taylor's insistence that 'power' and 'domination' must have recourse to the notion of constraint of human agency in order to be meaningful makes just such a presupposition.¹²⁷ This refers precisely to the characterization of power as necessarily repressive and negative that Foucault identifies as part of the juridico-discursive model.¹²⁸

Indeed, Taylor argues that in line with the recognition that power and domination are only meaningful in terms of constraint or repression, so 'freedom' is only meaningful if it refers to a lessening or lifting of that restraint. He suggests,

'[P]ower' belongs in a semantic field from which 'truth' and 'freedom' cannot be excluded. Because it is linked with the notion of the imposition on our significant desires/purposes, it cannot be separated from the notion of some relative lifting of this restraint, from an unimpeded fulfillment of these desires/purposes. But this is just what is involved in a notion of freedom.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Foucault comments, for example, on Habermas' conflation of 'power' and 'domination.' See "Problematics," 416.

¹²⁷ Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," 90.

¹²⁸ Foucault comments "I would like to disconnect the notion of power from the notion of domination. Domination is only one form of power-relation. I should also note that power has to be de-connected from the notion of repression. There are a lot of power-relations which have repression-effects, but there are also a lot of power-relations which have something else entirely as their consequence." "Problematics," 418.

¹²⁹ Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," 91-92.

Taylor's characterization of freedom in this passage clearly draws on traditional liberal ideas of (negative) freedom as the extent to which one is free from imposition and control. Contrary to Taylor's view, Foucault does talk about freedom and it becomes an increasingly important theme in his later work. The problem with how Taylor conceives of freedom here is that liberty is posited as the opposite of power: that freedom and power are in inverse proportion to one another. Within this framework, then, Taylor is right to argue that the terms 'power' and 'domination' are only meaningful if understood under the rubric of 'constraint,' and that freedom is only meaningful if understood as liberation from that constraint. But it is precisely this conceptual relationship between the terms 'power' and 'freedom' that Foucault disrupts. For him, as we see in detail below, freedom is not posed as the opposite of power.

Foucault states explicitly the need for an analytics of power to 'free itself' from the juridico-discursive model.¹³⁰ His point is that the latter is no longer adequate to describe the operation of power in societies of our own time. The continuing preoccupation with questions of right and consent, the conception of power in terms of juridical binaries, the problems of freedom and will, the state, and sovereignty are, in Foucault's view, all because we have yet to dispose of an underlying monarchical model.¹³¹ Foucault does not think that these forms and questions have ceased to be important, but that the juridico-discursive model has failed to keep pace with societal change and corollary changes in power that are irreducible to this historical model.¹³² The juridico-discursive model, Foucault argues, "is utterly incongruous with the new methods of power whose operation is not ensured by right but by technique, not by law but by normalization, not by punishment but by control, methods that are employed on all levels and in forms that go beyond the state and its apparatus."¹³³ Foucault thus places his own analytics of power as an alternative to this model; his own work addresses explicitly the modern operation of power as technique, normalization, and discipline, as they operate throughout society and in individual relationships. Foucault goes on:

¹³⁰ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 82.

¹³¹ Ibid., 88-89. "In political thought and analysis, we still have not cut off the head of the king."

¹³² Ibid., 89.

¹³³ Ibid.

One remains attached to a certain image of power-law, of power-sovereignty, which was traced out by the theoreticians of right and the monarchic institution. It is this image that we must break free of, that is, of the theoretical privilege of law and sovereignty, if we wish to analyze power within the concrete and historical framework of its operation. We must construct an analytics of power that no longer takes law as a model and a code [...] We shall try to rid ourselves of a juridical and negative representation of power, and cease to conceive of it in terms of law, prohibition, liberty, and sovereignty.¹³⁴

Foucault's alternative account of power, then, must be evaluated not only in terms of how far it enables a move beyond the juridico-discursive model, but in terms of a framework in which to articulate an alternative conception of 'resistance.'

The analytics of governmentality

Consistent with his rejection of the juridico-discursive model of power, and in developing his account of power relations, in his later work Foucault turns to the idea of 'government.' This represents a dual movement: on the one hand, Foucault uses 'governmentality' as an analytical framework through which to conceive of the arts and technologies of government since the sixteenth century.¹³⁵ On the other hand, as we see further below, Foucault uses 'government' to refer to interpersonal exercises of power characterised as the 'conduct of conduct.' Adopting Thomas Lemke's phrase, the 'analytics of governmentality' represents the conceptual and analytical framework that Foucault proposes as an alternative way of understanding the operation of political power.¹³⁶ My aim here is to provide a preliminary overview of the analytics of governmentality, focussing on the key ideas that contribute to a renewed approach to conceiving the political field.

In providing the framework for an alternative critical approach to the operation of political power, 'governmentality' offers a number of useful poles of reference for

¹³⁴ Ibid., 90.

¹³⁵ See Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, ed. Michel Senellart et. al., trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2009); and *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979*, ed. Michel Senellart et. al., trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

¹³⁶ See Thomas Lemke, *Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique* (Boulder, U.S: Paradigm Publishers, 2012), especially 35-38.

understanding Foucault's ideas about politics. Most significantly, 'governmentality' re-frames the operation of political power in modern Western societies. In his analyses of arts and technologies of governmentality Foucault de-emphasises the individualising role of discipline, turning instead to population-focused 'biopolitics.' Although much of Foucault's investigation into governmentality and biopolitics is structured by a critique of liberalism, the poles of analysis that Foucault develops through this investigation nevertheless mark a significant departure from the juridico-discursive model of power. This is particularly the case in the way that Foucault decouples political power from the state, which in turn requires a conceptual overhaul of the concepts of 'state,' 'civil society' and even 'politics' itself.

In using 'governmentality,' Foucault is usually taken to refer to the various arts and regimes of government and administration.¹³⁷ In the opening lecture of *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault sets up the object of analysis of government as concerned not with actual governmental practice, but with governmental rationalities. That is, the internal rationalities underlying the limits that government sets for itself, the technologies that it uses, and the reasons or values to which it has recourse for its justification and legitimisation. Foucault argues that he wants to study the "reasoned way of governing best," the "reflection on the best possible way of governing" and to "grasp the level of reflection in the practice of government."¹³⁸ Foucault's aim in focusing on governmental rationalities is to bring into focus the discursive conditions of specific formations and technologies of government. That is, to clarify the ways that specific formations of governmental power – the state being the prime example – rely upon particular discourses (and thereby their underlying *épistémès*) to justify and support the exercise of power. As I discuss further below, a prime example of this is the way that liberal governmental rationalities rely on discourses about 'freedom' and 'security.'

Consistent with his archaeo-genealogical commitments, Foucault is explicit in not taking such concepts as 'the state' and 'sovereignty' as points of origin from which to analyse governmental practices.¹³⁹ Rather, he inverts the normal course of other forms of analysis (sociological for example) and poses governmental practice as the starting point from which to approach these concepts as specific historical and

¹³⁷ See Dean, 'Introduction' in *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society* (London: Sage, 1999), 2.

¹³⁸ Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 2.

social phenomena. As Walters points out, governmentality is therefore closely tied with a genealogy of the modern state.¹⁴⁰ In *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault argues that a genealogy of the modern state can be constructed “on the basis of a history of governmental reason.”¹⁴¹ In addition to exploring the state at the level of its concrete practices, then, it also includes the reason whereby government legitimises and rationalises itself. In this way, governmentality can be seen as an extension of Foucault’s archaeo-genealogical method of analysis. He uses specific practices (for example, the kinds of routines and exercises that prisoners are subject to) as the starting point for examining purportedly universal concepts or given social formations (for example, the prison). Instead of using ‘universals’ as grids of intelligibility, he uses historical and social practices as the grids of intelligibility for universals.¹⁴² In doing so he is able to show how the concepts and formations of ‘the state,’ ‘society,’ ‘sovereign’ and ‘subjects’ emerge, thereby placing their status into question.¹⁴³

In this way, Foucault analyses the formation of the state and the formation of subjects from a single analytical perspective.¹⁴⁴ As we see further in later chapters, this is significant because it enables an alternative vision of politics and political power that sees subjects as emerging as part of the political field. At this point it is important to note how the analytics of governmentality foregrounds this alternative by disassociating political power from the state. In the first instance, an analytics of governmentality enables a critical analysis of statism and specific governmental rationalities that does not pose the subject (that is, the investigating, analysing subject) as external to the phenomena under investigation. As Lemke notes, the analytics of government does not “take for granted the idea of some originating subject that pre-exists and determines political processes and is referred to as *the state*.”¹⁴⁵ The concept of government, moreover, is supposed to enable an investigation of the conditions and circumstances from which ‘the state’ emerges, thus enabling its historical situation.

Like the concepts of politics and the economy, for Foucault ‘the state’ as such does not exist. He argues politics and the economy “are things that do not exist and yet which are inscribed in reality and fall under a regime of truth dividing the true and the

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ William Walters, *Governmentality: Critical Encounters* (Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 12.

¹⁴¹ See Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, especially 354.

¹⁴² Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 3.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ See Lemke, *Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique*, 13.

false.”¹⁴⁶ The state can be thought of, then, as the actualisation of a particular arrangement of power and knowledge, the concept of which is reified through certain discursive conditions. The state, as a specific governmental technology, is thus a “transactional reality”: a real but non-substantive effect of a particular arrangement of power relations.¹⁴⁷ Lemke describes this as “a dynamic ensemble of relations and syntheses that at the same time produces the institutional structure of the state and the knowledge of the state.”¹⁴⁸

Similarly, Foucault places in question the phenomena of ‘civil society.’ He argues that civil society is a correlative concept of liberal governmental technology.¹⁴⁹ It does not exist as such, but represents a particular arrangement of social and power relations inscribed with the concept of civil society, as defined through a particular technology of government. What Foucault wants to dispel is the characterisation of civil society in political and philosophical discourse as “a reality which asserts itself, struggles, and rises up, which revolts against and is outside government or the state, or the state apparatuses or institutions.”¹⁵⁰ Foucault is questioning the extent to which we can deploy the idea of civil society against particular governmental technologies. In what should now be a familiar strategy, Foucault undermines this possibility by pointing out that there is no civil society, just a historically and socially delimited concept, which may one day itself be viewed as part of the archive of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

What is especially significant here is that Foucault thereby undermines the idea that social organisations defined over and against ‘the state’ can offer a community a collective source of resistance. Although this does indeed appear to limit even further critical and practical avenues for conceiving resistance to political power, it nevertheless simultaneously presents an alternative way of conceiving political power and politics. Particularly, I am interested in the way that Foucault’s de-coupling of political power from the state requires a renewed approach to thinking about the sources of political power and its extension throughout society. Moreover, it requires an alternative way of conceiving political activity. Read in conjunction with the

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 34.

¹⁴⁶ Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 20.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 297.

¹⁴⁸ Lemke, *Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique*, 27.

¹⁴⁹ Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 296.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 297.

description of power relations, as we see further below, Foucault opens up the possibility of conceiving politics in ways that make political activity and resistance available in alternative forms and spaces. Before turning to this, however, it is necessary to examine in further detail the concepts of ‘relations of power,’ ‘freedom’ and ‘resistance.’

Questions of power: is ‘resistance’ possible?

In this section I outline the key elements of Foucault’s account of power – focusing primarily on the ‘analytics’ of *The Will to Knowledge* and the account provided in ‘The Subject and Power’ – within the context provided by the critical claims outlined in the first part of Chapter One. The subsequent questions that I aim to address are: First, given that in Foucault’s account the possibility of resistance is inscribed within networks of power relations, is the possibility of a critical approach to exercises of power precluded in the way that Habermas’ view suggests? Second, do Foucault’s distinctions between ‘power relations,’ ‘domination’ and ‘violence’ form an adequate basis upon which to critically evaluate power? I proceed by first providing an overview of these three key concepts, before providing a preliminary answer to these questions. (In the next section I then turn to the question of whether Foucault’s descriptions of ‘liberty’ and ‘resistance’ provide such a foundation.) Providing an answer to these questions is important because they speak to the political relevance of Foucault’s account of power, and of his work more broadly. As I outline at the end of the chapter, they also have a bearing on the ethical and political aspects of his later work.

Foucault’s account of power appears to offer few avenues for critically evaluating power as either ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ or deeming some exercises of power to be legitimate and others illegitimate. This is often taken to lead inevitably to the conclusion that Foucault’s account fails to offer any practical possibilities for resisting power. The most significant reason for this is Foucault’s assertion that “[p]ower is everywhere.”¹⁵¹ When he made this claim, however, he did not mean that power is all constitutive, totalizing, and therefore ‘inescapable.’ In *The Will to Knowledge*, Foucault clarified this by opposing it to traditional models that associate power as

¹⁵¹ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 93.

emanating from a single point, from a “unique source of sovereignty.”¹⁵² Rather, power is everywhere because it “comes from everywhere.”¹⁵³ What Foucault means is that power is produced everywhere and by everyone in a given society.

This indicates another key facet of Foucault’s account. ‘Power’ for Foucault is always short for ‘relations of power,’¹⁵⁴ meaning both that power is a relation of force between two or more points and that relations of power are co-extensive with social relationships. As Foucault argues:

Relations of power are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relations), but are immanent in the latter; they are the immediate effects of the divisions, inequalities, and disequilibria which occur in the latter, and conversely they are the internal conditions of those differentiations; relations of power are not in superstructural positions, with merely a role of prohibition or accompaniment; they have a directly productive role, wherever they come into play.¹⁵⁵

In the “The Subject and Power,” Foucault clarifies this point, explaining that power relationships are a necessary and unavoidable facet of social relationships, and therefore completely pervade society. They are “rooted deep in the social nexus.”¹⁵⁶ As Barry Hindess notes, “power – and the resistance and evasion that it provokes – must be regarded as a ubiquitous feature of human interaction.”¹⁵⁷

It is the “strictly relational character” of power relations that provides the key to understanding the relationship between power and resistance.¹⁵⁸ For Foucault, the possibility of resistance is inscribed *within* power relations: “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.”¹⁵⁹ He argues that to pose the problem of resisting power in terms of ‘escaping’ power relations or as a matter of approaching power

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ See “The Ethic of Care,” 11. In “The Subject and Power,” Foucault suggests that “power as such does not exist” (786).

¹⁵⁵ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 94.

¹⁵⁶ Foucault, ‘The Subject and Power,’ 791.

¹⁵⁷ Hindess, “Discipline and Cherish,” 100.

¹⁵⁸ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 95.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

from its ‘outside’ is to misunderstand its very nature, and therefore the nature of the problem. Power relations depend on “a multiplicity of points of resistance,” which are “present everywhere in the power network.”¹⁶⁰ In this way Foucault rejects, and poses an alternative to, the binary structure of power he associates with the juridico-discursive model: “there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations, and serving as a general matrix.”¹⁶¹ This, as we will see below, is closely related to how Foucault conceives of the relationship between power and freedom. The point to note here is that power is never one-sided; it is never located and exercised solely from one point over and against another point that ‘has no power.’

Here we come to the other significant feature of power for Foucault, and which also marks another significant point of departure from traditional liberal conceptions. Power for Foucault can be described neither in terms of capacity nor strength. He argues that it “is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared.”¹⁶² Neither is it a physical capacity.¹⁶³ Foucault distinguishes the power of physical strength or capacities employed in our everyday use and manipulation of objects from the exercise of power in a relation: it is “that which is exerted over things and gives the ability to modify, use, consume, or destroy them—a power which stems from aptitudes directly inherent in the body or relayed by external instruments.”¹⁶⁴ Foucault explicitly rejects the idea that power involves a simple or quantitative capacity: it is not “a certain strength we are endowed with.”¹⁶⁵ This idea, which in modern political theory can be traced back to Hobbes, posits power as a capacity that can be measured, held and exercised.¹⁶⁶ Hindess describes it simply as a “generalized capacity to act.”¹⁶⁷

By returning to Foucault’s view that ‘resistance’ is in fact a defining feature of relations of power we can begin to define ‘domination.’ In *The Will to Knowledge*, Foucault insists that resistances are “*inscribed*” in relations of power as their

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 94.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 93.

¹⁶⁴ Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” 786.

¹⁶⁵ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 93.

¹⁶⁶ See Barry Hindess, *Discourses of Power*, for a clear exposition on the themes of capacity and consent in modern political philosophy, particularly in regards to Hobbes and Locke, and Foucault’s relationship to these thinkers and themes.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 1.

“irreducible opposite” [my emphasis].¹⁶⁸ Here we have the key point of differentiation between what Foucault means by ‘power’ and what he means by ‘domination.’ States of domination, according to Foucault, are when “relations of power, instead of being variable and allowing different partners a strategy which alters them, find themselves firmly set and congealed.”¹⁶⁹ A state of domination is what occurs when a power relation or set of relations have become static such that the opportunities for resistance are removed or have become so minimal that there is no real possibility of transforming that relation or set of relations. In states of domination “relations of power are fixed in such a way that they are perpetually asymmetrical and the margin of liberty is extremely limited.”¹⁷⁰ Foucault uses an historical example of marriage to illustrate this point:

To take an example, very paradigmatic to be sure: in the traditional conjugal relation in the society of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we cannot say that there was only male power; the woman herself could do a lot of things: be unfaithful to him, extract money from him, refuse him sexually. She was, however, subject to a state of domination, in the measure where all that was finally no more than a certain number of tricks which never brought about a reversal of the situation.¹⁷¹

Foucault’s point is that while in such a situation there may be some avenues for what appears to be acts of resistance, they do not go far enough in provoking the possibility of a ‘reversal’ of the situation: regardless of these small avenues, the ‘dominated’ person is unable to disrupt the asymmetry of the relation.

Of course there are many examples – such as the asymmetrical relation between parent and child or institutional examples such as schools – that would qualify under this description as a state of domination, and yet be considered socially legitimate. Indeed, Foucault’s definition as it stands is insufficient to condemn some states of domination and not others, even though it is clear from some of his comments that he thinks that some should be.¹⁷² In this way, Foucault’s definition of domination is problematic. He needs to go further in order to account for how some states of

¹⁶⁸ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 96.

¹⁶⁹ Foucault, “The Ethic of Care,” 3.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

domination are acceptable, even if this does not resort to *a priori* categories. There is, I argue, a way around this problem, if we consider the use of domination within the context of Foucault's work on ethics.

In a state of domination the concrete possibilities for effective resistance are removed, which is when power becomes equivalent to physical determination.¹⁷³ In this way, Foucault lays the foundation for distinguishing power and domination from violence. While domination is 'equivalent' to a physical determination, Foucault is very clear that neither domination nor power is reducible to violence. Violence, according to Foucault, "acts upon a body or upon things; it forces, it bends, it breaks on the wheel, it destroys, or it closes the door on all possibilities. Its opposite pole can only be passivity, and if it comes up against any resistance, it has no other option but to try to minimize it."¹⁷⁴ In line with this description of violence, Foucault further refines what he means by relations of power. In contrast to violence, "what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future."¹⁷⁵ He argues further that the exercise of power

is a total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; in the extreme constrains or forbids absolutely; it is nevertheless always a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action. A set of actions upon other actions.¹⁷⁶

What Foucault means is that the exercise of power merely refers to the kinds of actions and strategies we use every day to influence the behaviour and actions of the people around us. He goes on, "to live in a society is to live in such a way that action upon other actions is possible—and in fact ongoing. A society without power relations

¹⁷² See, for example, "The Ethic of Care," 18-20.

¹⁷³ Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 790.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 789.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

can only be an abstraction,”¹⁷⁷ at the same time emphasizing the fact that power relations are co-extensive with the social field.

Returning the questions posed at the beginning of this section, it is clear that Foucault does distinguish between relations of power and states of domination, on the one hand, and relations of violence on the other. The problem, however, is Foucault’s failure to posit these distinctions in relation to any predetermined normative conceptions of what constitutes legitimate or illegitimate exercises of power. His very description of the nature of ‘power’ is taken to preclude both concrete opportunities for resistance and the very possibility of an evaluative critique. Even Foucault’s insistence that resistance is the irreducible opposite of power is not seen as a serious commitment to a political or emancipatory agenda. For Habermas, at least, the characterization of resistance in terms of power prevents such a political reading. But Foucault states explicitly that this is not the case, stating that “this does not mean that they [resistances] are only a reaction of rebound, forming with respect to the basic domination an underside that is in the end always passive, doomed to defeat.”¹⁷⁸

Paul Patton suggests that we approach this problem by making further distinctions between ‘power,’ ‘power over,’ and ‘domination.’¹⁷⁹ Power, according to Patton, should be understood as “the capacity to do or become certain things.”¹⁸⁰ As he notes, this form of power is always at play in human interaction, when the actions of one person affect the actions or field of possible actions of another person. This leads to the subsequent characterization of ‘power over’ as being when one person has succeeded in modifying the actions or field of possible actions of another person.¹⁸¹ As Patton notes, “‘Power over’ in this sense will be an inescapable feature of any social interaction.”¹⁸² Moreover, there is no guarantee that an attempt to affect someone’s field of actions will necessarily succeed, because “power is always exercised between subjects of power, each with their own distinct capacities for action” and because of this “resistance is always possible.”¹⁸³ Most importantly, however, is that given this characterization the exercise of power is normatively neutral. As Patton argues, “It

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 791.

¹⁷⁸ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 96.

¹⁷⁹ Patton, “Foucault’s Subject of Power,” 67.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 68.

involves no reference to action against the interests of the other party.”¹⁸⁴ Similarly, given Foucault’s characterization of domination does not refer to the oppression or restriction of ‘essential’ human qualities, but to the relatively stable organization of relations of power, such that the successful modification of another person’s actions is guaranteed, ‘domination’ fails to carry normative weight. As Paul Patton notes for Foucault “the exercise of power over others is not always bad, and states of domination are not always to be avoided.”¹⁸⁵

To clarify some of these points, I turn momentarily to the account of power proposed by Hannah Arendt. Arendt, like Foucault, moves away from certain traditions in theorizing power, although the subsequent alternatives proposed by each thinker are for the most part strikingly different. Where they each break from the liberal tradition, and arguably also their closest point of similarity, is in their respective rejections of the characterization of power in quantitative terms of capacity or strength.¹⁸⁶ For Foucault, as we have already seen, this is primarily in response to the idea that power is something that can be held, and therefore transferred or exchanged, as it is in the liberal tradition. In contrast Foucault argues that power should only be thought of in relational terms and then only insofar as it is exercised.

For Arendt too power must be clearly distinguished from any sense of capacity or physical strength. It cannot be quantified or held; it cannot be possessed. In *The Human Condition* she states: “power cannot be stored up and kept in reserve for emergencies, like the instruments of violence, but exists only in its actualization. [...] Power is always, as we would say, a power potential and not an unchangeable, measurable, and reliable entity like force or strength.”¹⁸⁷ As Foucault states in *The Will to Knowledge*, power is not “a certain strength we are endowed with.”¹⁸⁸ But for Arendt, however, the critical force of this distinction does not come from the fact of its irreducibility to physical strength; it is in the implicit assumption that as capacity or strength power belongs to the domain of the individual. Its defining feature is that it is the condition of *plurality* that gives rise to power: “While strength is the natural

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 67.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 69.

¹⁸⁶ For a good analysis of the details of their similarities and differences, see Amy Allen, “Power, Subjectivity, and Agency: Between Arendt and Foucault,” in *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 10:2 (2002, published online 8 December, 2010), 131-149.

¹⁸⁷ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), 200.

¹⁸⁸ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 93.

quality of an individual seen in isolation, power springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse.”¹⁸⁹

Human plurality is the cornerstone of Arendt’s political philosophy; it is the condition of all political life.¹⁹⁰ Thus Arendt states: “whoever, for whatever reasons, isolates himself and does not partake in being together, forfeits power and becomes impotent, no matter how great his strength and how valid his reasons.”¹⁹¹ Power arises between people in community with one another: it emerges out of their being together. The condition of this emergence is the ‘space of appearance.’ This is the public, political space for which the potential exists wherever people are together. In Arendt’s words: “The space of appearance comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action, and therefore predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government, that is, the various forms in which the public realm can be organized.”¹⁹² In this way it is not bound to the physical arrangements that signify public or community places, like the town square, parliament, community hall.¹⁹³ It is the fact of unique individuals being in community with one another, through speech and action. These, too, are predicated on human plurality, which renders human beings both equal and unique: it is the “paradoxical plurality of unique beings.”¹⁹⁴ For Arendt power arises when people speak and act in community with one another, it is a power that can be exercised collectively to a common purpose.¹⁹⁵

Foucault thus positions his analytics of power as both a critique of and an alternative to traditional theories of power. Like Arendt, for Foucault power is not negative: it does not imply the repression of freedom. Yet for Foucault, the positivity of power has different implications than for Arendt, for whom power is positive

¹⁸⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 200.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 7. Note the now famous statement from *The Human Condition* where she defines the condition of human plurality as “the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.”

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 201.

¹⁹² Ibid., 199.

¹⁹³ Arendt describes it in terms of the *polis*: “The *polis*, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be.” Ibid., 198.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 176.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 200. According to Arendt: “Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities.”

because it makes collective political action possible, by guaranteeing the space of appearance. Significantly, both thinkers emphasise the relational nature of power, although it leads them to different conclusions. For Foucault, as we have seen, relations are a constitutive condition of the exercise of power; but this does not lead to a shared or consensual model. His description of ‘power relations’ represents a clear break from the idea that political power bears an intrinsic link to the ideas of consent and legitimacy. For Arendt, alternatively, power is normatively positive, referring to the collective force that arises out of community. As Amy Allen points out, Arendt and Foucault’s respective accounts of power may be more complementary than normally thought. Indeed, they can each be seen as addressing weaknesses in the other’s thought. Particularly, as Allen notes, in focusing on the positive aspects of collective action, Arendt tends to neglect instances of power that are directed toward negative or nefarious ends.¹⁹⁶ Conversely, Allen argues that Arendt’s concept of power enables us to “understand how the collective power that is generated in public spheres can serve as a resource for individuals who are struggling to resist the kinds of problematic and disturbing power relations that Foucault exposed.”¹⁹⁷

Returning to Foucault’s account of power relations, I want to make one final observation before turning to his idea of freedom. It is precisely because of their co-extension with, or embeddedness within, the social nexus that power relations are contingent upon the specific historico-social order in which they arise, and therefore open to subversion. Foucault’s analysis, far from implying that their inherence places power relations beyond criticism suggests that social being has the critique of power at its heart. Foucault states: “I would say that the analysis, elaboration, and bringing into question of power relations and the ‘agonism’ between power relations and the intransitivity of freedom is a permanent political task inherent in all social existence.”¹⁹⁸ Indeed, it is their immanence in social relations that, rather than constituting a normative framework of evaluation, provides a situational and praxis-based critique. I take up this point in later chapters: it is the relationship to self that forms the basis or foundation for this limitation. The task of questioning relations of power – which might *manifest* as the resistance to exercise of power or arts of government – is founded in the critical praxis of self-constitution. I argue, furthermore

¹⁹⁶ Allen, “Power, Subjectivity, and Agency,” 143.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 144.

¹⁹⁸ Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” 791-792.

that the relation to self can be thought of as the 'permanent limit' to relations of power.

Questions of power: what is freedom?

Foucault's use of 'freedom' initially appears to offer few possibilities for a seriously political reading of his account of power more broadly. This is partly because his description of freedom appears to place the latter as a conditional counterpart to relations of power. In this way, the meaning of power remains tied to freedom, but not in the way that Taylor thinks it should be. As such, Foucault's account is certainly vulnerable to criticism that his use of 'freedom' is politically meaningless. In tying freedom so close to power, it certainly appears that such an account could only fail in being able to articulate a source of resistance. In conducting this analysis, I examine Foucault's description of freedom in the context of certain liberal ideas about freedom. Foucault explicitly rejected both the idea that liberty is an inviolable space inalienable from the individual and the corollary idea that power and freedom are mutually exclusive. Despite this, Foucault's description of the relationship between freedom and power is liable to lead to misunderstandings about what 'freedom' really means. I offer then an amended description of freedom that attempts to avoid these problems.

According to Foucault's definition, as we have already seen, power can only be exercised within a relation as actions upon *acting subjects* or subjects *capable* of action. As such, freedom can be understood in the first instance as a structural condition of power. Foucault makes this point forcefully when he states that:

[A] power relationship can only be articulated on the basis of two elements which are each indispensable if it is really to be a power relationship: that 'the other' (the one over whom power is exercised) be thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end as a person who acts; and that, faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up.¹⁹⁹

A relation can only be one of power if it is founded on the possibility of a greater or lesser number of alternative actions. In this way, Foucault appears to identify freedom with a field or range of possible behaviours and actions, which is a *condition* of

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 789.

relations of power. Indeed, Foucault explicitly states that the ‘free subject’ is a condition for the exercise of power. He argues that: “Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free. By this we mean individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments, may be realized.”²⁰⁰ Freedom thus appears in its most basic form to refer to a field of possibilities or possible actions.

Foucault’s description of the exercise of power as government – in the broad sense of the management of the behaviour and conduct of individuals or groups – appears to support this reading of freedom. He suggests for example that “[t]he exercise of power consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome.”²⁰¹ It describes the ways – including those deliberate, overt or tacit ways – that we get other people to do or not to do things. To govern in this sense, according to Foucault, “is to structure the possible field of action of others.”²⁰² But this is where Foucault’s description of freedom runs into problems. As suggested above, the respective characterisations of freedom in relation to power and government both imply a general idea of freedom as a ‘field of possible actions.’ This characterisation appears to place Foucault’s idea of freedom closer to the liberal conception, in the sense that freedom is usually conceived as a ‘space’ or ‘area’ of freedom, and by portraying the individual as the site or locus of this freedom. In guiding the possibility of conduct, government appears to operate by shaping and curtailing the field of possibilities within a given relation. As such, government as the conduct of conduct can be seen as both emerging from and shaping the relations between subjects. As such, this has been taken to mean that government ‘shapes freedom.’²⁰³ This particular description aligns Foucault’s idea of freedom closer to the liberal tradition: it suggests that power operates over and against freedom.

Moreover, in posing freedom as a defining counterpart of government, Foucault posits the individual as the locus of a quality or state of freedom. He notes: “It is free individuals who try to control, to determine, to delimit the liberty of others and, in order to do that, they dispose of certain instruments to govern others. That rests indeed on freedom, on the relationship of self to self and the relationship to the other.”²⁰⁴ As

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 790.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 789.

²⁰² Ibid., 790.

²⁰³ Dean, *Governmentality*, 13.

²⁰⁴ Foucault, “The Ethic of Care,” 20.

Walters points out, government thus assumes a degree of freedom on both sides of the power relation.²⁰⁵ Dean takes this to mean that government thus “entails the idea that the one governed is, at least in some rudimentary sense, an actor and therefore a locus of freedom.”²⁰⁶ Under Dean’s reading, subjects are free because they are endowed with bodily and mental capacities.²⁰⁷ These capacities are thought to be primary to the relations of government through which they are exercised and manipulated. Dean argues that “[t]he notion of government as the ‘conduct of conduct’ presupposes the primary freedom of those who are governed entailed in the capacities of acting and thinking.”²⁰⁸

Thus the description of freedom as a ‘field of possible actions’ complicates Foucault’s attempt to displace the concepts of power and freedom associated with the juridico-discursive and liberal traditions. Specifically, in using this description to assist in the definition of power relations, the ‘field of possible actions’ recalls the spatial aspect of liberal conceptions of freedom, thus attributing ‘freedom’ as a quality of individuals. Moreover, it appears to posit freedom as located in individuals’ capacities prior to the governmental relation in which they are exercised. If conduct ‘shapes’ freedom, therefore, government is implicitly posited as that which takes hold of these capacities, thereby falling back into a conception of power as that which represses freedom. Foucault wants to say that freedom and power are not defined in opposition to one another, but are conditions of one another in the sense both must be present. Power is not that which reduces or represses an originary freedom. As such, the description of freedom as a ‘field of possibilities’ appears inconsistent with this view. There is I suggest a way around this problem, if we re-examine what Foucault means by ‘field’ and the relational context of both power and freedom. I return to this below.

Before doing so, there is more to be taken from Foucault’s characterisation of power in terms of government. At first glance this does not appear very different from his characterisation of the exercise of power as actions that modify the actions of

²⁰⁵ Walters, *Governmentality*, 12.

²⁰⁶ Dean, *Governmentality*, 13.

²⁰⁷ Dean, *Governmentality*, 13. Cf. Patton, “Foucault’s Subject of Power.”

²⁰⁸ Dean, *Governmentality*, 15.

others. But it is in his use of ‘conduct’ that the shift becomes clear.²⁰⁹ When he writes, “to ‘conduct’ others is at the same time to ‘lead’ others (according to mechanisms of coercion which are, to varying degrees, strict) and a way of behaving within a more or less open field of possibilities,”²¹⁰ he is doing more than describing the way in which someone can affect another’s behaviour within, or by structuring, a field of possible actions.²¹¹ He is linking together the exercise of power over others with the individual’s own behaviour. That is, the manner in which the exercise of power over others is intrinsically tied to one’s own comportment and mode of being. I return to this idea in detail in following chapters. What should be noted here is the way that the ‘practice’ of liberty is evoked in this double use of ‘conduct.’ That is, the actualisation of freedom in ‘actions’ does not go far enough in capturing the sense in which for Foucault freedom implies deliberate practice and exercise. This arises, for example, when Foucault uses ‘freedom’ to clarify the distinction between power and domination. In a state of domination, according to Foucault, “the practice of liberty does not exist or exists only unilaterally or is extremely confined and limited.”²¹² Indeed, it is because of its intimate connection with power that the practice of liberty is a problem (I discuss this further in Chapter Five). It is sufficient to note here how the ‘practice of liberty’ indicates a decisive move away from the ideas about freedom corollary to the theories of power that Foucault rejects. I note here some of these ideas, before returning to Foucault’s own formulation.

Freedom and liberalism: technologies of government

As part of his analysis of eighteenth century liberal arts of government in the lectures of *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault points to some of the problems with conceptualizing, comparing and analyzing ‘freedom’ under the different political and governmental models. Foucault thinks that there are two main, albeit broad, reasons for this: first, that freedom cannot be quantified in such a way as to allow a comparison of the amounts of freedom allowed by different governmental models;

²⁰⁹ The translator notes, “Foucault is playing on the double meaning in French of the verb *conduire*—to lead or to drive, and *se conduire*—to behave or conduct oneself, whence *la conduite*, conduct or behaviour.” (“The Subject and Power,” 789n)

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 221.

²¹¹ This indicates the function of government: actions upon the actions of others are not necessarily limited to that specific action, indeed, one would think that in most cases governing others is intended to have further-reaching effects than this, that is, affecting the behaviour of another within a range of possible actions, in the present or the future.

second, that freedom does not have an ultimately universal nature that can be tracked, as it were, through its various manifestations and variations.²¹³ Indeed, Foucault questions the way in which freedom, in the liberal tradition at least, has been conceptualized in terms of space. He argues that freedom

[I]s not a universal which is particularized in time and geography. Freedom is not a white surface with more or less numerous black spaces here and there and from time to time. Freedom is never anything other—but this is already a great deal—than an actual relation between governors and governed, a relation in which the measure of the ‘too little’ existing freedom is given by the ‘even more’ freedom demanded.²¹⁴

It is clear from this passage that Foucault rejects the idea that ‘freedom’ is somehow a space or area linked to the individual prior to their participation in the social and political domain. Rather, Foucault sees freedom as relationally defined. As I argue further below, for Foucault there is no essential state of freedom, just a socially and politically defined relation. Foucault thus sets up an alternative way of thinking about freedom *relationally*.²¹⁵

Foucault further complicates the relationship of liberalism to ‘freedom,’ arguing that rather than just a matter of the recognition and guarantee of the amount of freedom ‘agreed’ between individuals and the state or sovereign, liberalism produces the requisites of freedom: that is, guaranteeing those conditions that enable freedom.²¹⁶ There is a tension between the production of those conditions and the freedom that they are supposed to enable. Thus Foucault states: “Liberalism [...] entails at its heart a productive/destructive relationship [with] freedom. [...] Liberalism must produce

²¹² Foucault, “The Ethic of Care,” 3.

²¹³ See Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 62-63.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

²¹⁵ Thomas L. Dumm points out that both Berlin’s conceptions of positive and negative liberty turn on a conception of ‘natural’ space that delimits the ‘area’ or amount of freedom. He argues that: “In contrast to Foucault Berlin’s epistemological assumption concerning space is that it *is of itself*: as an empty neutrality, space operates as the *ground* upon which his argument concerning freedom is constructed, and as the product of the boundaries that produce it, space is the container for freedom, that which protects it as a possession of the boundaries created by its own exercise.” (*Michel Foucault and the Politics of Freedom*, Vol. 9 of *Modernity and Political Thought* [Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1996], 47-48.) As Dumm points out, however, Berlin’s account fails to problematize (to use Foucault’s term) the constructed or architectural aspect of this supposedly neutral space of non-interference (*Ibid.*, 48).

²¹⁶ See Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 63.

freedom, but this very act entails the establishment of limitations, controls, forms of coercion, and obligations relying on threats etcetera.”²¹⁷ Foucault’s point is that ‘freedom’ is deployed as a technology of the liberal government rationality. As such, it refers to the problem of ‘security.’ This is really the question of the extent to which the interests of individuals should be secured against the encroachment of the interests of others (and the representation of those interests by the state), and the extent to which the interest of the state (representing the collective interests of its members) should be secured against the interests of individuals.²¹⁸ The interplay of freedom and security, for Foucault, results in what he calls the problems of the ‘economy of power.’²¹⁹ This is really the traditional issue at stake in contractual models of political power. I return to this in a moment.

Foucault points out that as a consequence of this liberal economy of power, that the liberal art of government actually requires an increase and extension of “procedures of control, constraint, and coercion which are something like the counterpart and counterweight of different freedoms.”²²⁰ Indeed, the development of such disciplines, which includes Bentham’s Panopticon, is “exactly contemporaneous with the age of freedoms.”²²¹ Foucault’s point is that the discourses surrounding liberalism and its particular art of government have glossed over the extent to which its conceptions of ‘freedom’ rely on ever increasing modes and techniques of discipline and control. There are two clear points then on which Foucault explicitly sets himself apart from this tradition. First, he does not think that freedom should be conceived as an area of non-interference, against which power is defined as that which encroaches upon this area. Indeed, he undermines the liberal conception of freedom by pointing out that it is in fact a technology of liberal rationalities of government. In this way, Foucault undermines criticisms of his own account that implicitly or explicitly refer to this tradition. Second, Foucault similarly calls into question the characterisation of liberty as an essential quality or condition of human beings, particularly, as a quality inalienable from the individual. As we see further below, for Foucault liberty arises in relations between people.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 64.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 65.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid., 67.

²²¹ Ibid.

Indeed, it should be noted how strongly Foucault rejects the liberal tradition's recourse to 'human nature' and 'natural rights' in the definition and delimitation of liberty. In response to the problem of how to determine the minimum area that ought to be inviolable, the classical view of negative liberty turns to a conception of human nature:

We must preserve a minimum area of personal freedom if we are not to 'deny or degrade our nature'. We cannot remain absolutely free, and must give up some of our liberty to preserve the rest. But total self-surrender is self-defeating. What then must the minimum be? That which man cannot give up with offending against the essence of his human nature.²²²

Following the Lockean tradition, the individual ('man') is thus set off as pre-existing the social arrangement or contract by which she agrees to limit the inalienable freedom that is part of her human nature. Locke of course conceived of liberty as a natural and inalienable right. While requiring compromise and certain limitation through the social contract, Locke sees the latter as ultimately guaranteeing individuals' natural rights within civic society.

In contrast to Locke, who thinks that the social contract establishes and maintains man's natural rights within civic society, therefore reinforcing the inalienability of natural rights such as liberty, for Rousseau natural rights are alienable to the extent that they are exchanged for civic rights. Thus the right to freedom gained through the contract *is* inalienable: but it is a different kind of freedom than that of man in his 'natural' state. Thus he argues: "What man loses by the social contract is his natural liberty and the absolute right to anything that tempts him and that he can take; what he gains by the social contract is civil liberty and the legal right of property in what he possesses."²²³ Freedom for Rousseau, then, is more than the ability and opportunity to follow one's desires and wants: this is the lesser form of freedom – or 'independence' as he calls it – associated with man as he is in nature. As Rousseau describes it elsewhere,

²²² Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Four Essays on Liberty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 126.

²²³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. & Introduction by Maurice Cranston. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), Book I, Chapter 8, 65.

Liberty consists less in doing one's own will than in not being subject to that of another; it consists further in not subjecting the will of others to our own [...] In the common liberty no one has a right to do what the liberty of any other forbids him to do; and true liberty is never destructive of itself. Thus liberty without justice is a veritable contradiction [...] There is no liberty, then, without laws, or where any man is above the laws [...] A free people obeys, but it does not serve; it has magistrates, but not masters; it obeys nothing but the laws, and thanks to the force of the laws, it does not obey men.²²⁴

In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau identifies 'independence' or 'natural liberty' with physical strength: "we must clearly distinguish between *natural* liberty, which has no limit but the physical power of the individual concerned, and *civil* liberty, which is limited by the general will; and we must distinguish also between *possession*, which is based only on force or 'the right of the first occupant,' and *property*, which must rest on a legal title."²²⁵ Rousseau continues: "We might also add that man acquires with civil society, moral freedom, which alone makes man the master of himself; for to be governed by appetite alone is slavery, while obedience to a law one prescribes for oneself is freedom."²²⁶

For Rousseau, it is only upon entering civic and political society that individuals (and people as a society) gain any 'rights'; whereby the social order established under the *aegis* of the social contract forms the basis for all other rights: "the social order is a sacred right which serves as a basis for all other rights."²²⁷ Like Locke, Rousseau thinks that men are born free, and as such liberty is inalienable.²²⁸ For Locke, of course, the natural right of liberty is maintained and ensured by the social contract, given that individuals give up a certain amount of this liberty. The social contract thus functions to preserve natural rights, although this inevitably requires the forfeiture of some of these. For Rousseau, however, the social contract represents the exchange of any so-called 'natural rights' for those real rights gained upon entering political

²²⁴ Rousseau, *Lettres écrites de la montagne*, Letter 8, Pléiade, vol. 3, 841-2, quoted in "Introduction" in *The Social Contract*, 32.

²²⁵ Rousseau, Book I, Chapter 8, 65.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Rousseau, Book I, Chapter 1, 50.

²²⁸ "For they are born men; they are born free; their liberty belongs to them; no one but they themselves has the right to dispose of it." (Ibid., Book I, Chapter 4, 54.)

society.²²⁹ Thus for Rousseau, man's independence prior to entering society cannot properly be called a right; rather than surrendering their liberty, men convert their independence into moral and political freedom.²³⁰

Relations of freedom

Taking into account his critique of liberalism, then, it is clear that an interpretation of the 'field of possibilities' that leads closer to the liberal view would indeed be inconsistent with Foucault's underlying philosophical commitments. However, we do not need to discard this description of liberty—especially since doing so would compromise his broader account of power relations. Rather, we need to focus instead on the *relational* aspect of freedom.

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of Foucault's own conception of freedom is that it is inalienable from power. In Foucault's view, liberty and power are not opposed to one another; freedom is not thought as that where power has failed to take hold, or the space left in which to act.

[T]here is no face to face confrontation of power and freedom which is mutually exclusive (freedom disappears everywhere power is exercised), but a much more complex interplay. In this game freedom may well appear as the condition for the exercise of power (at the same time its precondition, since freedom must exist for power to be exerted, and also its permanent support, since without the possibility of recalcitrance, power would be equivalent to a physical determination).²³¹

Foucault clearly rejects both the characterization of freedom and power as mutually exclusive and that the idea that an exercise of power necessarily results in a reduction or elimination of liberty. He argues that "if there are relations of power throughout every social field it is *because* there is freedom everywhere" [my emphasis].²³²

²²⁹ Rousseau states that "the social pact, far from destroying natural equality, substitutes, on the contrary, a moral and lawful equality for whatever physical inequality that nature may have imposed on mankind; so that however unequal in strength and intelligence, men become equal by covenant and by right." (Ibid., Book I, Chapter 9, 68.)

²³⁰ See "Introduction" in *The Social Contract*, 33-34.

²³¹ Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 790.

²³² Foucault, "The Ethic of Care," 12.

Exercises of power therefore do not necessarily result in a ‘reduction’ of the field of possibilities, and therefore in a minimization of opportunities for resistance. It is the case, however, that Foucault’s use of ‘field’ [*un champ*] in his description of freedom is liable to lead to such misunderstandings. A field of possibilities [*un champ de possibilité*]²³³ can give the impression of a space delimited by power, as in the liberal tradition (and the French lends itself to this reading as much as its English translation). It should, however, be read more in the sense of a field or domain of actions [*un champ d’action*] or, even better, as a political field [*un champ politique*]. Under this reading, freedom would not be a field of possible actions insofar as they are ‘permitted’ by power, but refer to the political domain that arises between subjects.

Indeed, in casting liberty as a condition of power, Foucault poses this ‘field’ as a battleground, in constant tension between exercises of power and acts of resistance.²³⁴ Thus Foucault suggests that “Rather than speaking of an essential freedom, it would be better to speak of an ‘agonism’—of a relationship which is at the same time reciprocal incitation and struggle; less of a face-to-face confrontation which paralyses both sides than a permanent provocation.”²³⁵ This is why, in the passage above, Foucault states that freedom is nothing other than an actual relation between subjects of power. It is always contested, negotiated. (This idea of freedom as encompassing a form of agonism is taken up in later chapters, where this agonism is manifest in the interplay of subjectivation [*assujettissement*] and self-constitution as a practice of freedom.) As such, freedom refers less to a field of possible actions than to a *political* domain that emerges only between individuals in relation to one another.

Thus what Foucault calls the ‘field’ of possibilities is not a ‘personal’ area of freedom: it is not attached to the individual as such, and it certainly does not conceived as an essential aspect of our ‘human nature.’ Freedom as a political domain arises *in relation* between two or more people. We can hear here an echo of Arendt’s idea of power: an individual in isolation cannot be free. For Arendt, of course,

²³³ See the original French version of this part of the essay “The Subject and Power,” where Foucault says “Le pouvoir ne s’exerce que sur des «sujets libres», et en tant qu’ils sont «libres» - entendons par là des sujets individuels ou collectives qui ont devant eux un champ de possibilité où plusieurs conduits, plusieurs reactions et divers modes de comportement peuvent prendre place.” (“Le sujet et le pouvoir” in *Dits et écrits 1954-1988, II: 1976-1988*, eds. Daniel Defert, François Ewald and Jacques Lagrange [France: Quarto Gallimard, 2001], 1056.)

²³⁴ Dumm observes that “if one accepts, with Foucault, that transgressions are themselves practical exercises of freedom, the containment of freedom in neutral space becomes incoherent.” (*Michel Foucault and the Politics of Freedom*, 48.)

²³⁵ Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” 790.

plurality is a condition of freedom, since the latter can only be actualized through action. For Arendt, freedom is tied to ‘beginning’: the capacity for creation that arises out of natality.²³⁶ Action renews the originary beginning of natality: “action has the closest connection with the human condition of natality; the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting.”²³⁷ Freedom, then, consists in the potential to create something anew, to do something unexpected, but which can only be realized through action in the space of appearance. According to Arendt: “The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world.”²³⁸ Freedom is inexorably political, since it only arises within community, like power, in the space of appearance. Similarly, Foucault departs from the idea of liberty in liberal political theory when he characterises freedom, like power, as relational. But what we get from Arendt is the idea that the *actualization* of freedom relies upon a plurality of people, which is itself the condition of political life. In Foucaultian terms, this is significant because it renders the practice of liberty meaningful according to the terms and context of that relation of power.

This is further clarified by what we can take from reading Foucault in the context of Rousseau. That is, the idea that liberty takes its real meaning and significance from its social context. For Rousseau, it is not ‘natural liberty’ that is meaningful: it is the idea of freedom as an aspect of our being in society with one another. Not dissimilarly, Foucault emphasizes an idea of freedom as that which is defined between people in relation to one another. I am not suggesting that Foucault has a corollary conception of ‘natural liberty,’ but that Foucault’s description of freedom emerges from the more fundamental idea that freedom and power are constitutive components of the social. Freedom would then refer to a practice within a relationally defined domain or field of action. In this way, the field of action should be

²³⁶ “With the creation of man, the principle of beginning came into the world itself, which, of course, is only another way of saying that the principle of freedom was created when man was created but not before.” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 177.)

²³⁷ Ibid., 9. She goes on: “In this sense of initiative, an element of action, and therefore of natality, is inherent in all human activities. Moreover, since action is the political activity par excellence, natality, and not mortality, may be the central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought.”

²³⁸ Ibid., 178.

thought it terms of the actions and behaviours made meaningful within that relation. For Foucault, liberty arises in relations between individuals. As we see in later chapters, it is this idea that gives rise to the imperative for a *practice* of liberty that refers to the subject's *ēthos*.

What needs further clarification, however, is how this relationship between power and freedom contributes to Foucault's political objectives. I have argued that freedom is only coherent within Foucault's broader account if conceived as an aspect or quality of the relation between individuals in society with one another. As has been made clear, Foucault's idea of freedom cannot therefore act as a normative basis upon which to conduct a transcendent critique of power. This could be taken as evidence as to a complete failure to articulate a concept of freedom that enables a critical and political analysis of power. But as already suggested in previous sections, such a reading loses sight of the reasons behind Foucault's disruption of freedom as it relates to the liberal and juridico-discursive models.

Foucault wants to distance himself from the liberal tradition's recourse to natural law and natural rights, founded on an *a priori* idea of human nature. He is concerned principally with the vulnerability of this recourse to political and ideological manipulation. Isaiah Berlin expresses a similar concern, pointing out that both the negative and positive notions of liberty refer to particular ideas of 'man' or 'human being': "conceptions of freedom directly derive from views of what constitutes a self, a person, a man. Enough manipulation with the definition of man, and freedom can be made to mean whatever the manipulator wishes."²³⁹ Foucault rejected the idea of *liberation* on similar terms, arguing that it would inevitably refer back to an essential human nature or self that could be liberated:

[T]here is the danger that it ['liberation'] will refer back to the idea that there does exist a nature or a human foundation which, as a result of a certain number of historical, social or economic processes, found itself concealed, alienated or imprisoned in and by some repressive mechanism.²⁴⁰

In tying liberty so closely to power Foucault dislocates it from *a priori* definitions of human nature, removes it from the domain of the individual and places it instead

²³⁹ Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 134.

²⁴⁰ Foucault, "The Ethic of Care," 2.

between individuals—as a political field that forms part of Foucault’s idea of the social. This enables Foucault to move away from characterisation of power as a negative, repressive force, because it is no longer conceived as the binary counterpart to freedom.

While both the positive and negative accounts of freedom as described by Berlin refer to an *a priori* conception of what it means to be a human being and agent, for Foucault liberty is a condition of the processes by which individuals *become* subjects. That is, the processes by which they become this or that kind of human being. Clearly this notion of liberty would not go far in addressing Taylor’s assertion that Foucault’s concepts of ‘power’ and ‘domination’ must be juxtaposed against a normative conception of human agency as constrained or limited in order to be meaningful. As demonstrated above, for Foucault this claim is made from a position that makes certain assumptions about what ‘freedom’ and ‘power’ mean, and are located within the very traditions from which Foucault was attempting to distance himself. While the political and philosophical reasons behind this movement may be clear, more needs to be said about how Foucault’s formulation constitutes more than a rejection of previous theories, and presents a politically and philosophically meaningful alternative. While the relational account of freedom I have outlined overcomes internal inconsistencies, it needs to be pressed further in order to show how it contributes to an alternative idea of politics, and a politically meaningful notion of resistance.

Within the context of this chapter we can begin to see how the *practice* of liberty provides such a point of departure. Particularly, the way in which Foucault links the critical attitude and the practice of critique as part of the *work* of freedom. To be really free is not to be in a state of freedom; it consists in the possibility of stepping back from the frameworks and institutions within which the conception of our formal freedoms are legitimized. As John Rajchman describes it,

Thus our real freedom does not consist in telling our true stories and finding our place within some tradition or ethical code, in completely determining our actions in accordance with universal principles, or in accepting our existential limitations in authentic self-relation. We are, on the contrary, ‘really free’ because we can identify and change those procedures or forms through which our stories become true,

because we can question and modify those systems which make (only) particular kinds of action possible, and because there is no ‘authentic’ self-relation we must conform to.²⁴¹

Recalling Foucault’s characterization of thought, freedom is thus the ability to step back from, reflect upon, and challenge the frameworks of interpretation and practice through which we understand and constitute ourselves. As Rajchman observes, Foucault’s philosophical project attempts to offer a means of this stepping-back: “Foucault invents a philosophy which would ‘free’ our experience of ourselves and our subjectivity.”²⁴² The actualization of freedom thus consists in the ability to perform practices that would challenge given modes of being.

What then can be said in response to the questions posed at the beginning of this section? Freedom is not only a structural condition of power; it refers to a specific political domain that emerges simultaneously to relations of power. This is why Foucault refuses to characterize freedom as an essential quality of individuals. He speaks instead of *practices* of liberty, and of the critical attitude referring to the ‘work’ of freedom carried out within this political domain. Does this mean that it cannot function as a source of resistance, or even as a conceptual foundation from which to begin to articulate ideas of subjectivity and resistance? More needs to be said about how the practice and work of liberty can form the basis of a critical evaluation of power, let alone how the practices of freedom can actually function as resistance to power.

Conclusion

What are the ethical and political stakes of this account and of the conclusions drawn so far? For Foucault freedom is neither an absolute state to be attained, nor an inherent quality of being human. It is, however, an inalienable feature of social interaction: of people living in relation to one another. It refers to a political domain that arises within and contemporaneous to networks of power, between subjects of power. In this way, the discursive field that gives meaning to the range of actions and behaviours within

²⁴¹ John Rajchman, *Michel Foucault: The Freedom of Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 122.

²⁴² Ibid. He argues further that “in suspending universalist narrative and anthropological assurance about abstract freedom, Foucault directs our attention to the very concrete freedom

this relation defines the ways in which certain actions and behaviours will be interpreted.

In the first part of the chapter I suggested that Foucault's critical ontology of ourselves in the present continues his broadly 'archaeo-genealogical' approach. Particularly, his genealogy of the modern subject seeks to bring to light the discursive conditions of our particular ways of understanding ourselves and others. In this way, Foucault re-institutes the subject as part of the discursive and epistemological field, demonstrating that these ways of understanding are therefore open to challenge. In the critical attitude, Foucault describes a stance taken in relation to forms and technologies of government, whereby one gives oneself the 'right' to question authority on its relation to truth.

For Foucault, the possibility of resistance is inscribed in networks of power relations. It is because of this that it has been rejected as a basis for distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable instances of power, although it is seen as evidence that Foucault at least wanted to make such distinctions.²⁴³ In Chapter Three we see that part of its meaning is bound within the subject's capacity for self-constitution; that when we think about the 'possibility' of resistance we are referring to the capacity for self-constitution that is bound within *body-subjects*. Yet, limiting the meaning of resistance in this way ignores the critical operation that should be central to the concept of resistance. As we have seen, Foucault likens the critical attitude to 'revolt': to a 'non-acceptance.' He further posits critique as referring to the 'undefined work of freedom.' In this way, we begin to see that resistance to power should be thought as founded in this right to question the relationship between authority and truth.

As I point out in later chapters, this sheds new light on Foucault's emphasis on ancient practices of the self. As we will see, Foucault sees such practices as cultivating this 'right' to question the relationship between authority and truth. Yet the central

of writing, thinking, and living in a permanent questioning of those systems of thought and problematic forms of experience in which we find ourselves." (6-7)

²⁴³ See Fraser, "Foucault on Modern Power," 29. What should be kept in mind is that the exercise of power itself is not a problem. The problem is not, as Foucault states clearly, the exercise of power as such, but "to know how you are to avoid in these practices [associated with government and the conduct of conduct] [...] the effects of domination which will make a child subject to the arbitrary and useless authority of a teacher, or put a student under the power of an abusively authoritarian professor, and so forth. I think these problems should be posed in

question raised in part two of Chapter One remains: namely, how can Foucault invoke notions of freedom and resistance and yet claim that ‘the individual’ is the internal product-effect of disciplinary power? I address this in detail in the next chapter.

Chapter Three: Subjects of power and ethics

Introduction

The conclusion that Foucault cannot speak about resistance in a genuine way – because his account does not admit the body as either a bearer of *a priori* values or as endowed with a minimum strength or agency – relies on the view that to posit the body as inextricably located *within* networks of power is to posit the body as necessarily *determined* by power. Similarly, the idea of ‘production’ when read in conjunction with Foucault’s statement that ‘power is everywhere’ is liable to lead to the interpretation of any ‘capacities’ or ‘skills’ associated with the body or subject as produced by power, and therefore as entirely determined by power. In this way, the body produced by disciplinary techniques appears to be an object incapable of resistance not only because the actions of which the body is capable are those that are forced and controlled by heteronomous sources, but because there is no internality or depth that ‘escapes’ power. Not only does this interpretation fall back upon the juridico-discursive concept of power, as noted in Chapter Two, but it relies too heavily on a limited but popular reading of Foucault’s ‘docile body’ that denies its subjective aspects. In this chapter I offer an alternative account of the ‘body-subject.’

The chapter is divided into two parts. In part one, I argue that Foucault’s concept of disciplinary power actually presupposes an active *body-subject* that has capacities and skills that arise *internal to* the disciplinary mechanism. In undertaking a preliminary analysis of how Foucault approaches ‘the subject’ in the archaeo-genealogical work compared with the approach that he adopts later, I suggest that his movement toward a self-constituting ethical subject is not inconsistent with his earlier philosophical position. By examining how ‘the individual’ arises within a network of force relations, I introduce the argument that the operation of disciplinary power presupposes subjective experience, thereby offering an alternative account of the ‘docile subject.’ This is supported by the work of Elizabeth Grosz, whose alternative reading of the operation of power as inscription (in contrast to Butler’s reading as outlined in Chapter One), presupposes subjective experience of disciplinary techniques. Similarly, Paul Patton’s idea of ‘meta-capacity’ – that is, the ability to use,

develop and experience one's own capacities – presupposes subjective experience and a sense of control over one's capacities that allows a subject-centred approach to the 'evaluation' of power. Read together these accounts provide further weight to the argument that disciplinary power presupposes body-subjects.

I turn in the second part of the chapter to Foucault's idea of the reflexive relationship to self (*rapport à soi*). This forms the conceptual foundation of Foucault's idea of the ethical subject who emerges as part of the historico-social reality of power relations. The four-fold structure of *rapport à soi* describes the modes by which individuals constitute and recognise themselves *as subjects*. These modes, however, are not independent of broader mechanisms of subjectivation (*assujettissement*), but exist in constant tension with them. Drawing on work by Deleuze and Butler, which demonstrates how the social relations in which we live are incorporated into the very constitution of the self, I argue that the body-subject can give rise to skills and capacities that emerge within networks of power yet which can be deployed responsively and spontaneously.

Powerful Subjects

Foucault's subject

Before turning to a preliminary analysis of Foucault's various views on 'the subject,' it is worth noting the ongoing debate that gives context to this discussion. Foucault clearly takes different positions with regard to 'the subject' throughout his work. These differences are sometimes read as indicating a substantial theoretical shift. While I do not wish to wade into the depths of this debate, nor into the broader context of the history of the philosophy of the subject, there are several points of particular relevance to the arguments presented here.²⁴⁴

On one hand, claims to a fundamental shift rely upon a particular comparative reading of the ethical subject of Foucault's later work over and against the work on

²⁴⁴ For contextual discussions about 'the Subject' in Foucault's work, and in the French context more broadly, see, for example: Michel Henry, "The Critique of the Subject," in *Topoi* 7 (1988): 147-153; Neve Gordon, "Foucault's Subject: An Ontological Reading," in *Polity* 31, no. 3 (Spring, 1999): 395-414; and Nina Power, "Philosophy's Subjects," in *Parrhesia* 3 (2007): 55-72.

power.²⁴⁵ This reads the ‘active’ and self-constituting subjects of ethics as conceptually opposed to the regimented self-policing subjects of power.²⁴⁶ Although these descriptions are not incorrect as such, they are caricatures that misrepresent the nuances of Foucault’s account.²⁴⁷ The potential for disciplinary subjects to act and resist is refused, while the capacity for self-constitution of ethical subjects over-emphasized. The consequences of this interpretation have especial implications for the political potential of Foucault’s work, partly because the possibility of resistance is taken to be the condition of any real political significance. In addition, the over-emphasis on the aesthetic aspects of self-constitution are thought to be devoid of any real political relevance, not to mention their purportedly egoistic underpinnings. Rather, as Colwell argues, “We need to see that the subject is neither entirely active nor passive in either the early or the later works. The subject is constituted/constitutes itself within a system of constraints, whether they be described as disciplinary or aesthetic.”²⁴⁸ As I argue further throughout the thesis, the key to understanding the political possibilities of an ethic of power lie within a more synthesised account, whereby the ethical aspects of the subject are seen as providing critical and theoretical depth to Foucault’s earlier thought. Such an approach even opens up new avenues of addressing perceived problems in the earlier work. One of the aims of this chapter is

²⁴⁵ Peter Dews, for example, asserts that the late appearance of such a subject constitutes an “abrupt theoretical shift.” (“The Return of the Subject in the Late Foucault,” in *Discourse: The Glasgow Journal of Philosophy*, no. 4 [Autumn/Winter 1988], 38). Eric Paras argues along similar lines, also reading Foucault’s late work as representing a ‘turn’ to subjectivity and therefore a rather radical break with earlier thought. In characterizing *subjects* as reflexive, active and self-constituting, he posits the ‘subject’ as something concrete, reified (*Foucault 2.0*, 13). He goes as far as to claim that in Foucault’s late works there is the presence of what Paras calls a ‘prediscursive subject,’ which he describes as “a subjective nucleus that precedes any practices that might be said to construct it” (*Ibid.*, 14).

²⁴⁶ Peter Dews, “Power and Subjectivity in Foucault,” in *New Left Review* I, no. 144 (March-April, 1984), 77.

²⁴⁷ This has significant implications. Particularly, there is the question of how other themes in Foucault’s work are to be read in light of this apparent shift in subjectivity. Of most importance to the arguments presented here is the view that the movement from the self-disciplining subject and docile body of *Discipline and Punish* to the self-constituting subject of volumes two and three of *The History of Sexuality* indicates a corollary decline in the role and importance of ‘power.’ Rudi Visker makes exactly this point, arguing that corresponding to the ‘turn’ to subjectivity is the disappearance of the concept of power. He suggests that while techniques of subjectivization may be associated with techniques of power, they are essentially distinct. Under this reading power would seem to be no longer of concern to Foucault in his late works, or, if it is, it is only insofar as power resurfaces through the idea of government and practices of the self, which are essentially different from techniques of power anyway. (See Rudi Visker, *Michel Foucault: Genealogy as Critique*, trans. Chris Turner [London: Verso, 1995] 87-88.) I take the opposite view.

²⁴⁸ C. Colwell, “The Retreat of the Subject in the Late Foucault,” in *Philosophy Today* 38, no. 1 (1994), 66.

precisely to offer an account of the subject that arises within a network of power relations, yet which has relatively undefined and unrestricted capacity for ethical self-development and responsiveness.

On the other hand, there is one school of thought that interprets this shift as a ‘return’ to the subject, which seems to imply that Foucault is returning to a position that he had previously rejected. This would posit Foucault’s late work as representing a significant movement away from his earlier philosophical concerns.²⁴⁹ Yet Foucault does not re-adopt the same ideas that he had previously questioned. The subject to which he objected so strongly in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and *The Order of Things* is not re-instituted late in his career. As Thomas McCarthy points out, Foucault ‘turns’ to a conception of subjects as social and embodied, following his previous rejection of the rational and autonomous Cartesian subject individuated from the world.²⁵⁰ While he again takes up the theme of subjectivity in relation to ancient ethics, it does not refer to the subject as the centre and condition of knowledge. The underlying philosophical commitments are consistent. In the discussion presented here I take the view that while there is certainly conceptual development and changes in approach and style in Foucault’s thinking about the subject, this does not in itself represent a fundamental philosophical shift. While he rejects certain theories of the subject in his archaeo-genealogical analyses, this rejection is not inconsistent with the account of subjectivity that he adopts later. As he notes in one late interview, “I don’t think there is actually a sovereign, founding subject, a universal form of subject that one could find everywhere. I am very sceptical and very hostile toward this conception of the subject.”²⁵¹ Indeed, he even emphasizes the importance of the genealogy of the modern self and subject – epitomized in his studies of ancient ethics and practices of the self – precisely because it enables the circumvention of the traditional philosophy of the subject.²⁵²

This appears then as a strategic move: a way of enabling a different approach to the way that we in the present are constituted and constitute ourselves in relation to

²⁴⁹ See for example: Peter Dews, “The Return of the Subject,” “Power and Subjectivity in Foucault,” and *Logics of Disintegration: Post-structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory* (London, Verso, 1987); Thomas McCarthy, “The Critique of Impure Reason: Foucault and the Frankfurt School,” in *Political Theory* 18, no. 3 (August, 1990): 437-469; Paras, *Foucault 2.0*; and Visser, *Michel Foucault*.

²⁵⁰ McCarthy, “The Critique of Impure Reason,” 438.

²⁵¹ Foucault, “An Aesthetics of Existence,” in *Foucault Live*, 452.

²⁵² See Foucault, “About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self,” 225n26.

truth and to power. Thus Foucault clarifies his position: “I had to reject a certain *a priori* theory of the subject in order to make this analysis of the relationships which can exist between the constitution of the subject or different forms of the subject and games of truth, practices of power and so forth.”²⁵³ Foucault does not place the subject as the *condition* of experience, but as the *result* of experience.²⁵⁴ This is what Foucault means by subjectivization [*assujettissement*]: “the process through which results the constitution of a subject, or more exactly, of a subjectivity which is obviously only one of the given possibilities of organising a consciousness of self.”²⁵⁵ The subject that features in the late work is neither founding nor sovereign. While he does reject an *a priori* theory of the subject, Foucault is careful to contextualize this move as part of a deliberate strategy in approaching the problem of the relationship between the subject and truth. Rather than establishing a theory of the subject in order to arrive at an approach to the problem of how knowledge is possible, Foucault is interested in how the subject is constituted, by others and by herself, through practices that bear a particular relation to truth.²⁵⁶ These late comments and qualifications are prefigured by Foucault’s attitude toward both the subject and corollary conception of ‘Man’ in *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, as noted in Chapter Two. Foucault thinks that ‘Man’ was really an invention of the Classical *épistémè*, and as such is passing away, as he stated notoriously in the closing pages of *The Order of Things*.²⁵⁷ But this strategic approach must also be understood within the context of Foucault’s suspicion of humanism, as I discuss below.

²⁵³ Foucault, “The Ethic of Care,” 10.

²⁵⁴ Foucault, “The Return of Morality,” in *Foucault Live*, 472.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ See Foucault, “The Ethic of Care,” 10.

²⁵⁷ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 421-422. Foucault writes: “one can be certain that man is a recent invention. [...] As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And perhaps one nearing its end.” Hannah Arendt’s comments about the problems with trying to define ‘Man’ are useful in this context. For Arendt, the attempt to define ‘Man’ is caught up in a more general problem of description: “The moment we want to say *who* somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying *what* he is; we get entangled in a description of qualities he necessarily shares with others like him; we begin to describe a type or a ‘character’ in the old meaning of the word, with the result that his specific uniqueness escapes us” (*The Human Condition*, 181). For Arendt, the attempt to describe who someone is belies the unique distinction which can only be disclosed through the subject’s speech and action. Attempting to describe what ‘Man’ is, according to Arendt, shares a similar result: “This frustration has the closest affinity with the well-known philosophic impossibility to arrive at a definition of man, all definitions being determinations or interpretations of *what* man is, of qualities, therefore, which he could possibly share with other living beings, whereas his specific difference would be found in a determination of what kind of a ‘who’ he is” (Ibid.). Within the context of Arendt’s philosophy, the very attempt to make such a definition ignores

Political subjects: what is ‘man’?

It would be a mistake to derive from Foucault’s ‘problematization’ of the concept and use of ‘human nature’ a general apathy toward the concrete, shared experiences of human beings. It is through the experience of power, as we see below, that Foucault conceives human commonality and solidarity. He merely calls into question the legitimacy of certain notions of human nature and the ways that they have been employed. ‘Man’ is the result of a certain mechanism of disciplinary power, deployed in order to cement the very operation of this mechanism. In Foucault’s words: “The man described for us, whom we are invited to free, is already in himself the effect of a subjection much more profound than himself.”²⁵⁸ As Cordner puts it: “The normalizing forces of disciplinary power shape the conviction that there is a shared human essence, and then operate to confine people in accordance with it.”²⁵⁹ Similarly, Foucault describes the emergence of the ‘man’ of modern humanism as arising out of the hold that disciplinary power has upon the body.²⁶⁰

Indeed, Foucault thinks that the very idea that human beings have a universal nature cannot help but be a reflection of the social, historical and cultural situation from which this idea emerges. He argues that “at least since the seventeenth century, what is called ‘humanism’ has always been obliged to lean on certain conceptions of man borrowed from religion, science, or politics. Humanism serves to color and to justify the conceptions of man to which it is, after all, obliged to take recourse.”²⁶¹ For Foucault, the problem lies less in the actual ideas about what this human nature might be than in the characterisation of these historically and culturally specific ideas as necessary and universal. Failing to realise the contingency of these ideas, in Foucault’s view, limits our potential to imagine and understand ourselves in different ways, let alone to experiment with the possibility of living and being differently.

Similarly, Foucault rejects humanism as a basis or framework through which to conduct political and philosophical analyses. In “What is Enlightenment?” Foucault

the uniqueness of human beings. The inability to define man in this way undermines any concrete, fixed conception upon which we might conduct human affairs and politics, or upon which we might base ethics. Thus this impossibility impacts politics in the space of appearance: that is, the inability to define human beings in this way undermines the stability of political or human affairs. It gives way to a constant movement and change.

²⁵⁸ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 30.

²⁵⁹ Christopher Cordner, “Foucault and Ethical Universality,” in *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 47, no. 6 (December, 2004), 580.

²⁶⁰ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 141.

argues that “we must not conclude that everything which has ever been linked with humanism is to be rejected, but that the humanistic thematic is in itself too supple, too diverse, too inconsistent to serve as an axis for reflection.”²⁶² It is partly because humanism does not acknowledge the contingency of its own concepts that Foucault thinks it fails on political grounds. The assumption of its own truth and universality precludes the kind of geneo-critical method that Foucault wants to employ. He adopts instead “the principle of a critique and a permanent creation of ourselves in our autonomy.”²⁶³ In doing so, Foucault also posits the critical and transformative aspects of the Enlightenment project in tension with humanism, rather than as its counterpart.²⁶⁴

Yet Foucault’s characterisation of the political possibilities of humanism may be too severe, indicating perhaps a lack of political and philosophical pragmatism on Foucault’s part. Noam Chomsky, whom Foucault debated on Dutch television in 1971, argues that some conception of human nature, even if incomplete, is essential to understanding the nature of power and oppression and envisaging a future just society.²⁶⁵ Chomsky points out that the political and moral imperative to act in a response to a situation one feels to be wrong sometimes outweighs the importance of such intellectual and philosophical questions.²⁶⁶ Indeed, Chomsky’s response gives rise to the question of whether Foucault gives enough credit to humanism, particularly in terms of its potential to be self-critical. Chomsky observes:

Our concept of human nature is certainly limited; it’s partially socially conditioned, constrained by our own character defects and the limitations of the intellectual culture in which we exist. Yet at the same time it is of critical importance that we know what impossible goals we’re trying to achieve, if we hope to achieve some of the

²⁶¹ Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” 314.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 313-314.

²⁶⁵ Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault, *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate on Human Nature*, foreword by John Rajchman (New York: The New Press, 2006), 41-42.

²⁶⁶ Chomsky suggests: “I think that in the intellectual domain of political action, that is the domain of trying to construct a vision of a just and free society on the basis of some notion of human nature, we face the very same problem that we face in immediate political action, namely, that of being impelled to do something, because the problems are so great, and yet knowing that what we do is on the basis of a very partial understanding of the social realities, and the human realities in this case.” (Ibid., 44)

possible goals. And that means that we have to be bold enough to speculate and create social theories on the basis of partial knowledge, while remaining very open to the strong possibility, and in fact overwhelming probability, that at least in some respects we're very far off the mark.²⁶⁷

In contrast to this self-characterization of the political stakes of the humanist thematic, Foucault's own concerns seem to fall too far on the side of the merely theoretical, placing philosophical stakes before social and political realities.

Yet Foucault maintains that the critical and political potential of 'human nature' is undermined by the fact that it cannot help but be a product of a particular socio-historical situation. He queries:

If you say that a certain human nature exists, that this human nature has not been given in actual society the rights and the possibilities which allow it to realize itself [...], doesn't one risk defining this human nature—which is at the same time ideal and real, and has been hidden and repressed until now—in terms borrowed from our society, from our civilization, from our culture?²⁶⁸

In this way Foucault ties the attempt to define the nature of human beings with the more general idea that power acts as an exclusory, repressive force. This is of course in line with his general criticisms of liberalism. Elsewhere Foucault describes the notion of human nature as an 'epistemological indicator,' marking certain types of discourse in relation to certain fields of knowledge (such as theology, biology or history).²⁶⁹ In this way it is part of the archive—a remnant of a certain set of discursive conditions. While this is certainly useful in thinking about humanist ideals as remnants of liberal discourses, it also offers an alternative approach to the question of why Foucault finds humanism – or more accurately, humanism's recourse to human nature – so problematic.

This is not to say that Foucault's critique of liberal political theory is irrelevant; his critique of the various expressions of liberalism and the forms of freedom they

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 45.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 43.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 7.

entail certainly sets the theoretical scene for his general attitude toward humanism.²⁷⁰ But it is perhaps more fruitful to take the idea of an epistemological indicator as an alternative point of departure. The problem is that overemphasising this connection between his problems with liberalism with his apparent anti-humanism might misconstrue what it is about humanism that Foucault finds problematic. As Michael C. Behrent suggests, the ‘humanism’ brought into question in *The Order of Things* is primarily epistemological, not that which affirms the inherent worth of human life.²⁷¹ Understood in this way, Foucault’s ‘anti-humanism’ may be less opposed to liberalism than usually thought.²⁷² If his problem with humanism is more to do with the epistemological favouritism of ‘man’ and less with the values and meanings ascribed to human beings, this might present the opportunity to read Foucault’s appraisal of liberal political theory more favourably, in this regard at least. This may in fact go some way in addressing the view, outlined in Chapter One, that Foucault’s apparent rejection of humanism is inconsistent with his valuation of ‘resistance’ and the autonomy of self-constitution.

Indeed, an earlier interview appears to support this reading.²⁷³ In this he criticises the discourses surrounding ‘human nature,’ which appear to posit the subject as powerful and sovereign, yet which actually operates to increase its subjection. He states: “By humanism I mean the totality of discourse through which Western man is told: ‘Even though you don’t exercise power, you can still be a ruler. Better yet, the more you deny yourself the exercise of power, the more you submit to those in power, then the more this increases your sovereignty.’”²⁷⁴ In this way, our observance of social standards, laws or even moral codes is presented as self-directed, equating

²⁷⁰ For a discussion of Foucault’s interest in economic liberalism, see Michael C. Behrent, “Liberalism without Humanism: Michel Foucault and the free-market creed, 1976-1979” in *Modern Intellectual History* 6, no. 3 (2009): 539-568.

²⁷¹ Behrent, “Liberalism without Humanism,” 543.

²⁷² Behrent notes that “Some of Foucault’s critics assume that his thought is fundamentally incompatible with liberalism of any kind. This appreciation rests, in the first place, on the various ways in which his work purported to unveil the subtle forms of repression lurking within allegedly liberal societies. But the greatest obstacle on the Foucauldian path to liberalism is usually considered to be his philosophical antihumanism.” (Ibid., 542.)

²⁷³ See Foucault, “Revolutionary Action: ‘Until Now’” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. and Introduction by Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 218-233.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 221. Foucault goes on: “Humanism invented a whole series of subjected sovereignties: the soul (ruling the body, but subjected to God), consciousness (sovereign in a context of judgment, but subjected to the necessities of truth), the individual (a titular control of personal rights subjected to the laws of nature and society), basic freedom (sovereign within, but accepting the demands of an outside world and ‘aligned with destiny’).”

sovereignty with the autonomy of subjectivity. Indeed, we can find the roots of this idea in Rousseau, who suggests that the social contract in its true form posits individuals as simultaneously subject and sovereign.²⁷⁵ Sovereignty is corollary to subjection because the power of the state is legitimised by consent. Foucault argues:

In short, humanism is everything in Western civilization that restricts *the desire for power*: it prohibits the desire for power and excludes the possibility of power being seized. The theory of the subject (in the double sense of the word) is at the heart of humanism and this is why our culture has tenaciously rejected anything that could weaken its hold upon us.²⁷⁶

It is this tendency of humanism to deny human beings ‘power’ that Foucault finds objectionable. But this merely reinforces the reasons he rejects liberalism for its claims to guarantee human rights and freedoms. As we saw in Chapter Two, Foucault thinks that such rights and freedoms are governmental technologies. Jon Simons describes Foucault’s view in slightly different terms: “If power is, as Foucault understands it, a positive, constitutive relation, then the restriction of the desire for power refers to the unwillingness to take responsibility for one’s own subjectification. Humanism seems to endow us with every power of agency except for agency with respect to ourselves.”²⁷⁷

Thus we can see in Foucault’s own account of subjects’ self-constituting practices the desire to *restore* power to human beings. But this is not, as we will see, the restoration of the power given up through consent to a sovereign authority. For Foucault it is a power defined by the capacity for self-constitution, and I argue in later chapters, for the critical self-relation at the foundation of how Foucault conceives of the possibility of resistance.

²⁷⁵ “Those who are associated in it [the sovereign state] take collectively the name of *a people*, and call themselves individually *citizens*, in so far as they share in the sovereign power, and *subjects*, in so far as they put themselves under the laws of the state.” Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 62.

²⁷⁶ Foucault, “Revolutionary Action,” 221-2.

²⁷⁷ Jon Simons, *Foucault and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1995), 48.

Powerful body-subjects

In this section I provide a brief overview of Foucault's account of disciplinary power, by way of the argument that his description of the emergence of 'the individual' goes some way in explaining how it is that the capacities and skills of the body arise within networks of power. As the second part of this chapter details further, this description also prefigures Foucault's conception of the reflexive relation to self (*rapport à soi*) as arising out of relations with others. First I outline Foucault's idea that 'the individual' is a product of power, like 'man' and 'human nature.' Second, I examine in detail the mechanism that 'fixes' the 'subject-function' to the 'somatic singularity' through which the individual emerges.

Foucault describes disciplinary power as a specific manifestation and mode of operation of power, epitomized in the eighteenth century by the 'discovery' of the body as an 'object and target of power.'²⁷⁸ Disciplinary power "may be identified neither with an institution nor with an apparatus; it is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a 'physics' or an 'anatomy' of power, a technology."²⁷⁹ Its targeting of individual bodies is one of the key differences from biopower, which targets people as a collective group or population. In contrast to sovereign power, which is conceived in hierarchical terms and is exercised from the top down, disciplinary power is exercised laterally, across all relations.²⁸⁰ Despite the differences between Foucault's accounts of discipline and biopower, they both articulate, albeit in different ways, alternative models of power de-identified from the state or sovereign and infiltrating all levels of social organisation.

Perhaps the key defining feature of discipline is the idea that the body is both a target and an instrument of the exercise of power. In the 1973-1974 lecture course *Psychiatric Power*, Foucault describes disciplinary power as "a total hold, or, at any rate, [it] tends to be an exhaustive capture of the individual's body, actions, time, and

²⁷⁸ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 136.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 215.

²⁸⁰ See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*; and Hindess, *Discourses of Power*, for a discussion of sovereign power especially as it relates to questions of consent and legitimacy. Hindess provides a succinct definition of sovereign power, which is "usually conceived of as a political power that is subordinated to no superior and [...] as dependent on the implicit consent of its subjects and therefore on the rights and obligations which that consent entails." (*Discourses of Power*, 12.)

behaviour.”²⁸¹ Foucault identifies three ‘disciplines’ that ensure both the constant subjection of the body’s forces and impose upon it a relation of ‘docility-utility.’ The first simultaneously individualizes and works upon the ‘mechanisms’ of the active body (its movements and gestures). The second takes as its object the economy of the body and works upon its forces. The third refers to the mode of discipline: the constant supervision and coercion of the body’s operations.²⁸² Foucault refers to these disciplines as “an art of the human body,” which was “directed not only at the growth of its skills, nor at the intensification of its subjection, but at the formation of a relation that in the mechanism itself makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful, and conversely.”²⁸³ In this way, “Discipline ‘makes’ individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise.”²⁸⁴

Foucault thus conceives of ‘the individual’ in much the same way as ‘the subject’ and ‘man’: as a product-effect of a particular mechanism of power. In characterising disciplinary power as constitutive of individuals, Foucault disrupts the usual way of thinking about the operation and effects of power in terms of repression (as already noted in Chapter Two). In doing so, he undermines the possibility of recourse to natural rights as a basis upon which to articulate ‘resistance’ as freeing the individual from these effects. He argues: “There is no point then in wanting to dismantle hierarchies, constraints, and prohibitions so that the individual can appear, as if the individual was something existing beneath all relationships of power, preexisting relationships of power, and unduly weighed down by them.”²⁸⁵ The consequences of such an account are taken by Foucault’s critics to be that there are limited, if any, avenues for articulating a politically or ethically meaningful idea of resistance.

Foucault’s account of the emergence of ‘the individual,’ however, provides the first step toward an alternative reading of the productive effects of disciplinary power (and relations of power more broadly) that does not preclude the possibility of undetermined ‘capacities’ and spontaneous actions. Recalling the description of the network of power relations, where power is exercised from ‘innumerable points’ and

²⁸¹ Foucault, *Psychiatric Power*, 46

²⁸² Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 136-137.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 137-138.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 170.

²⁸⁵ Foucault, *Psychiatric Power*, 56.

between which there are innumerable ‘force relations,’²⁸⁶ the individual can be said to ‘emerge’ at the point of intersection of these relations. They are the points upon which power is exercised and applied, which are defined and delimited by relations of power, but which also define and delimit those relations. As Colwell describes it, networks of power relations are ‘differential systems,’ in which “relations of power arise out of the differences between the subject positions” and it is “within this network, within this play of forces, that the contemporary form of subjectivity and the contemporary subject is produced.”²⁸⁷ It is the manner in which individuals are led to observe and regulate themselves under disciplinary power that subjects emerge as differential relations to themselves.²⁸⁸ Colwell argues that “[g]iven this understanding of power we can now see how the subject can be a relation to itself without positing any originary self to which the gaze is turned by disciplinary tactics.”²⁸⁹ The poles of the subject-as-relation emerge simultaneously within the network of power. Here we might recall Foucault’s definition of the subject of power, which is tied to its own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge.²⁹⁰

The individual is reified as a correlative result of disciplinary mechanisms that fasten “the subject-function to the somatic singularity.”²⁹¹ What Foucault means is that the subjective aspects of individuals are defined through social and power relations. It is through such relations that human beings are labelled and categorized as this or that kind of subject (or this or that kind of person)—the ‘mad’ subject, the ‘criminal’ subject. As Foucault describes it, “the subject-function of disciplinary power is applied and brought to bear on the body, on its actions, place, movements, strength, the moments of its life, and its discourses, on all of this.”²⁹²

Foucault does not mean that individuals are concretely produced, but that the individual as a bearer of attributes, meanings and symbols – as a subjected body – emerges at the point of intersection of relations of power. The “fundamental property” of disciplinary power, Foucault argues, is that it “*fabricates subjected bodies*; it pins the subject-function exactly to the body. It fabricates and distributes subjected bodies

²⁸⁶ See especially Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 92-95.

²⁸⁷ Colwell, “The Retreat of the Subject,” 64.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” 781.

²⁹¹ Foucault, *Psychiatric Power*, 55.

²⁹² Ibid.

[...] the individual is nothing other than the subjected body [my emphasis].”²⁹³ ‘The individual,’ then, is really short-hand for how Foucault conceives of the operation of relations of power in constituting body-subjects. In this way, power appears to ‘pre-exist’ the emergence of the individual: “In fact, the individual is the result of something that is prior to it: this mechanism, these procedures, which pin political power on the body.”²⁹⁴ This may appear to imply that bodies – the ‘somatic singularity’ – stand, as it were, ‘outside’ power, which would present the possibility that the body could be a bearer of values before its subjectivation [*assujettissement*]. Two preliminary defensive points can be made: first, the ‘techniques’ of power may in a sense be external to the body, at least on first appearance, but this does not place the somatic singularity outside the network itself. Second, the operation and efficacy of these techniques presuppose that they are subjectively experienced (I discuss this in the next section below). It is in this way, I argue, that disciplinary power presupposes *body-subjects*.

There is one final point to be noted before turning to Foucault’s description of the docile body. In the passage cited above, Foucault states that disciplinary techniques “pin political power on the body.”²⁹⁵ This foregrounds the argument developed below: namely, that understanding how the individual emerges within networks of power relations, means that the ‘capacities’ or ‘skills’ of the body-subject arise contemporaneously with the individual. This is not to say, however, that these capacities and skills are therefore completely determined. As we see below, these emerge with un-directed possibilities and the potential for spontaneous acts. Nevertheless they are (insofar as they emerge within a certain historically and socially specific arrangement of power relations) defined and given certain meanings by the discursive field in which they arise. What this means is that Foucault thinks of ‘political power’ as arising internal to networks of power; not founded in any strength or capacity of the body or human being as opposed to power. Significantly, this means that the potential for resistance arises in the application of disciplinary power to the body: it emerges within and through the network of power relations. The very operation of power engenders the possibility of its resistance.

²⁹³ Ibid., 55.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 56.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

Body-subjects: docility and recalcitrance

In light of the above account of the emergence of the individual, it is clear that Foucault's description of 'docile bodies' is only coherent within the broader account of disciplinary power if they too are shown to assume some form of 'capacity.' As I suggested initially in Chapter One, for Foucault bodies are never *just bodies*. They can only be thought in relation to their social, cultural and historical positions, to which the qualities, characteristics and predispositions that are ascribed to them refer. As such it is not 'bodies' as such to which Foucault's accounts refer, but to culturally encoded, historically and socially contingent *body-subjects*.

The aim of disciplinary power is to produce docility: "A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved."²⁹⁶ 'Docility' involves two elements by which the body is characterized and categorized: analysis, which posits the body in a specific relation to truth and knowledge; and control, by which it can be manipulated, coerced, transformed, created and which posits it in a specific relation to power.²⁹⁷ "That is to say," as Foucault describes it, "there may be a 'knowledge' of the body that is not exactly the science of its functioning, and a mastery of its forces that is more than the ability to conquer them: this knowledge and this mastery constitute what might be called the political technology of the body."²⁹⁸ Thus the defining characteristic of disciplinary power is the way that it makes use of the body as an instrument in its operation, but does not take it as its final target. Foucault writes: "The body now serves as an instrument or intermediary: if one intervenes upon it to imprison it, or to make it work, it is in order to deprive the individual of a liberty that is regarded both as a right and as property."²⁹⁹

²⁹⁶ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 136.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 26. Indeed, in *Discipline and Punish* Foucault proposed an alternative way of thinking about the relationship between power and knowledge: in short, that rather than thinking about power and knowledge as irreducible opposites, mutually exclusive of one another, they should be thought of in inextricable interrelation to one another. He argued: "power and knowledge directly imply one another [...] there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (Ibid., 27). But Foucault's analysis also indicates a different way of conceiving of the relationship between 'the subject' and 'truth': "In short, it is not the activity of the subject of knowledge that produces a corpus of knowledge, useful or resistant to power, but power-knowledge, the processes and struggles that traverse it and of which it is made up, that determines the forms and possible domains of knowledge" (Ibid., 28). In this way *Discipline and Punish* foregrounds Foucault's subsequent thinking about the relationship between the subject and truth from the perspective of government and ethics.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 11.

Foucault states clearly that the body has ‘capacities’ and ‘skills’ and is capable of ‘operations.’ In the following passage, Foucault characterizes these more generally as ‘forces’:

Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience). In short, it dissociates power from the body; on the one hand, it turns it into an ‘aptitude,’ a ‘capacity,’ which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the course of the energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection.³⁰⁰

Foucault clearly thinks that bodies have some kind of ‘power’ which can be coerced and directed. But it is not simply a matter of repressing or stymieing that power; in order to operate in its ideal form, and to achieve whatever objectives discipline is deployed to achieve, the disciplines must *use* that power. Thus the aim of disciplinary mechanisms directed at the body is to manipulate these forces or capacities so as to *produce* docility. The disciplines *subject* the body’s forces and impose upon them a “relation of docility-utility.”³⁰¹ The assumption of these skills or forces is necessary to Foucault’s claim that individuals are themselves instruments of the exercise of disciplinary techniques.³⁰² Indeed, in the above passage Foucault states that ‘it’ – the body’s ‘power’ – is dissociated and used to subject the body.

We might recall here Foucault’s idea that power relations are coextensive with the social field: a facet of power relations that he emphasized in *The Will to Knowledge*. This co-extensivity was foreground in *Discipline and Punish*, in which Foucault described the panopticon as a ‘diagram’ of social organization. Foucault writes: “The Panopticon [...] must be understood as a generalisable model of functioning; a way of defining power relations in terms of the everyday life of men [...] it is the diagram of a mechanism, of power reduced to its ideal form.”³⁰³ Deleuze describes it as a cartography that is coextensive with the social field.³⁰⁴ It is, however, a *model* of how disciplinary power functions. Foucault emphasizes that as such it is an

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 138.

³⁰¹ Ibid., 137.

³⁰² Foucault writes that: “Discipline ‘makes’ individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise.” (Ibid., 170)

³⁰³ Ibid., 205.

³⁰⁴ Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Seán Hand (London: Athlone, 1988), 34.

‘ideal form’ that is “abstracted from any obstacle, resistance or friction.”³⁰⁵ In this way, it fails to account for the possibility of recalcitrance or challenge. This point is made by Michelle Perrot (in dialogue with Foucault and Jean-Pierre Barou), in an interview conducted after the publication of *Discipline and Punish*, who observes that Bentham may have underestimated the objects of panoptic discipline: “One feels he [Bentham] has a very inadequate awareness of the degree of opacity and resistance of the material to be corrected and integrated into society—the prisoners.”³⁰⁶ She comments further that: “In the domain of prisons, the convicts weren’t passive beings. It’s Bentham who gives us to suppose that they were. The discourse of the penitentiary unfolds as though there were no people confronting it, nothing except a *tabula rasa* of subjects to be reformed and returned to the circuit of production.”³⁰⁷ From this perspective, the analytics of *The Will to Knowledge* rectifies this absence, positing recalcitrance and opposition as an inevitable and unavoidable aspect of the power network. Foucault incorporates this inevitability of resistance as a defining feature of the operation of power itself.

In Chapter One I outlined one possible reading of the body based on Foucault’s account of discipline; namely, that the production of ‘docile bodies’ posits bodies as mere effects of mechanisms of power. An alternative reading, however, is that the disciplining of bodies, far from positing bodies as inherently quiescent, *renders* bodies docile, and therefore presupposes some active potential or ‘power.’³⁰⁸ Paul Patton, for example, points out that the body subject to discipline “is a body composed of forces and endowed with capacities.”³⁰⁹ Foucault notes, for example, that through discipline, the body is “reduced as a ‘political’ force at the least cost and maximized as a useful force.”³¹⁰ What might Foucault mean here by ‘political force’? Re-read within the context of the analytics of *The Will to Knowledge*, such forces might even be read as implicitly referring to their potential for resistance. However, although Patton suggests that these capacities and powers are ‘primary,’ he does not think that the ‘thin’ notion of human being that they amount to allows such a measure.³¹¹ This is because these

³⁰⁵ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 205.

³⁰⁶ See “The Eye of Power,” in *Power/Knowledge*, 161-162.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ See, for example, Paul Patton: “this body is no mere inert matter upon which power is exercised and out of which ‘subjects’ are created.” (“Foucault’s Subject of Power,” 66.)

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

³¹⁰ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 221.

³¹¹ See Patton, “Foucault’s Subject of Power,” 70.

capacities or ‘powers’ depend on a broader social framework to give them meaning. As such there is no ‘minimum power’ that might serve as a normative measure of exercises of power more generally.

Elizabeth Grosz’s reading of the Foucaultian body can be applied usefully here.³¹² Grosz characterizes the way in which power functions upon the body as a form of inscription, through which human beings are attributed with ideas, beliefs and values. The application of power to the body is a form of codification, which places it in a certain position and with a certain meaning in the social order. However, the application of power as inscription is not completely constitutive; Grosz’s reading of Foucault supports the interpretation that power is applied to a body that, prior to that application, is active.

But if the body is the strategic target of systems of codification, supervision and constraint, it is also because the body and its energies and capacities exert an uncontrollable, unpredictable threat to a regular, systematic mode of social organization. As well as being the site of knowledge-power, the body is thus also a site of *resistance*, for it exerts a recalcitrance, and always entails the possibility of a counterstrategic reinscription, for it is capable of being self-marked, self-represented in alternative ways.³¹³

The exercise of power as corporeal inscription posits particular kinds of bodies as meaningful within a particular historical and cultural context and as specific to particular structures of power. This account of inscription, however, does not necessarily place the body outside the processes of its inscription, as it does for Butler. For Grosz, the process of inscription does not occur only on the surface of the body; this process, which she calls ‘body-writing,’ relies equally on ‘internal’ techniques. Such techniques presuppose a ‘body-subject,’ rather than conceiving of the body merely as an inert object.

These internal techniques, which re-make or transform the body, presuppose subjective experience. Actions that aim to transform the body – into a desired or proposed form or mode of being – demonstrate self-conscious experience of the body,

³¹² Elizabeth Grosz, “Inscriptions and Body-maps.”

³¹³ Ibid., 64.

indicative of internality. Thus the application of power to the body does not constitute it as merely surface:

The subject is *named* by being tagged or branded on its surface, creating a particular kind of ‘depth-body’ or interiority, a psychic layer the subject identifies as its (disembodied) core. Subjects thus produced are not simply the imposed results of alien, coercive forces; the body is internally lived, experienced and acted upon by the subject and the social collectivity.³¹⁴

The internal techniques of body-writing rely equally on the subject’s self-recognition and self-understanding in terms of the social context and frameworks of intelligibility in which these practices are carried out. Such subjective or self-conscious experience of the body points to the fact that it is body-subjects that exist within networks of power, and to which techniques of power are applied. Grosz’s idea that the exercise of power as bodily inscription presupposes the possibility of self-conscious self-inscription provides a useful point of departure for thinking about the *experience* of the exercise of power, including the power that the subject exercises over herself.

For Patton, the ability to distinguish between forms of power that involve domination and those that do not turns on a ‘fuller’ conception of human being, which he identifies with the notion of ‘meta-capacity’; that is, the ability to use, develop and experience one’s own capacities.³¹⁵ This meta-capacity is the first step to identifying a concept of ‘autonomy’ in Foucault’s work. It is not, however, a notion of autonomy that presupposes an essential freedom, as Patton points out. Insofar as meta-capacities turn on individuals’ ability to determine their own actions, autonomy is bound to freedom as a concrete field of possible actions. As such, this autonomy is bound within the relations of power out of which this field arises, and which gives it meaning. Patton describes autonomy as “a capacity to govern one’s own actions which is acquired by some people, in greater or lesser degree, and in respect of certain aspects of their bodies and behaviour.”³¹⁶ States of domination would thus be

³¹⁴ Ibid., 65

³¹⁵ Patton, “Foucault’s Subject of Power,” 72. Patton defines a meta-capacity as “the capacity for relatively autonomous use and development of one’s capacities is a meta-capacity, a means of directing and experiencing the exercise of other capacities of a particular body or determinate subject.”

³¹⁶ Ibid., 73.

identified as those that limit or remove the autonomous control of one's capacities. To quote Patton at length:

So long as human capacities do in fact include the power of individuals to act upon their own actions, we can see that Foucault's conception of human being in terms of power enables us to distinguish between those modes of exercise of power which inhibit and those which allow the self-directed use and development of human capacities. To the extent that individuals and groups acquire the meta-capacity for the autonomous exercise of certain of their own powers and capacities, they will inevitably be led to oppose forms of domination which prevent such activity.³¹⁷

We can see that Patton's notion of meta-capacity is similar to the self-conscious experience of the body that allows self-inscription. For both Patton and Grosz, Foucault's account of the body-subject of power enables a reading that places the body as always within networks of power, yet capable of some form of resistance.

The idea of capacities governed by an overarching meta-capacity emphasizes the importance of the situational account of human interaction to a Foucaultian idea of autonomy. In this way, Patton's characterization of capacities illustrates the extent to which subjects – even in their self-constitution – are influenced by their cultural and historical situation. In addition to the limits imposed by an individual's physical constitution, for example, the “kinds of action of which a human body is capable will depend [...] in part upon the enduring social and institutional relations within which it lives, but also upon the frameworks of moral interpretation which define its acts.”³¹⁸ Our actions – encompassing our motivations, objectives, the means or method we choose, and the meanings we ascribe to them – are embedded within, and to a large extent determined by, the social nexus.

For Patton, and for the argument presented here, this is important because the manner in which we relate our actions and behaviour to their social and historical context reflexively affect both our actions and the feelings we have about those actions, and therefore about ourselves. We are self-conscious of the motivations, intentions and possible consequences of our actions. As Patton notes: “the peculiarity

³¹⁷ Ibid., 72.

³¹⁸ Ibid., 74.

of human action is that it is not only conscious but self-conscious: we are happy or sad according to whether our actions produce a feeling that our power is enhanced or a feeling that it is diminished. In other words, our own actions, and the actions of others upon us, produce affective states and these affective states in turn affect our capacity to act.”³¹⁹ Such affective states, for example those produced by the success or failure of our actions to produce the desired outcome, contribute to our feeling or sense of ourselves as agents (for example, having confidence in my actions or ability to persuade others).

For Patton, this ‘feeling of power’ – the way in which we experience our actions and their effects within the world – presupposes a more complex conception of subjectivity than Foucault’s account of human beings as subjects of power allows.³²⁰ This account, in his view, while permitting the description of particular subjects’ capacities, with reference to the social context in which these capacities are formed, does not extend to the possibility of describing how subjects might experience the formation – either through external techniques or through self-applied techniques – of these capacities. Foucault must, according to Patton, “suppose a fuller conception of human subjectivity which takes into account both the interpretative and the self-reflective dimensions of human agency.”³²¹ For Patton, therefore, Foucault’s account of the subject of power as endowed with the capacities to do and become certain things – and with the meta-capacity for autonomy over these capacities – while allowing for a limited distinction between forms of power – principally those that involve or constitute domination, and those that do not – does not go far enough in allowing an account of how human subjects may *experience* these different forms. But Patton does acknowledge that perhaps this was where Foucault was heading. He suggests that Foucault’s later enquiries into ancient Greek practices might be seen as a recommendation of an ethics based on values internal to types of individual and social

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ Ibid., 75. Patton states: “[However] Foucault’s ‘thin’ conception of human being as a subject of power provides only the conceptual minimum required to describe the capacities of particular situated, corporeal subjects. These will result from the techniques of formation applied to the bodies of such subjects, as well as from the social relations within which they live and act. In order to account for the experience of these systems of power as forms of domination, as limits to individuals’ capacities for action, Foucault must presuppose the existence of particular forms of self-interpretation and the existence of something like the feeling of powerlessness. In other words, he must suppose a fuller conception of human subjectivity which takes into account both the interpretative and the self-reflective dimensions of human agency.”

³²¹ Ibid.

being.³²² I take up this idea in a slightly different way in Chapter Four, where I suggest that *rapport à soi* enables a situational evaluation of power.³²³

A description of individuals' somatic capacities as a subject of power, however, only allows a 'thin' conception of human being and which can only be described in terms of those capacities in reference to the social networks of which they are a part. In themselves, the capacities for action that are the criteria for Foucault's 'free' subject are not sufficient to determine some relations as legitimate exercises of power and others as illegitimate states of domination. Patton argues that such distinctions can only be drawn by presupposing that individuals have the capacity to *experience* some relations as positive – those that enhance a *feeling* of power and autonomy – and others as negative – for example, where individuals have a feeling of powerlessness. The evaluation of relationships of power must also presuppose systems or networks of interpretation. This form of agency, however, does not commit Foucault to a universal conception of humans as essentially free or universal experiences of agency. Such *experiential* aspects of agency are specific to individuals. Any evaluation of relations of power based on these internal and particular feelings or experiences will be internal to specific social and historical contexts.

In the next part of the chapter I turn to Foucault's concept of *rapport à soi* – the reflexive relationship with oneself – in order to develop an account of the body-subject that would contribute to an alternative account of politics. *Rapport à soi*, I argue, goes some way in accounting for how subjects can emerge contemporaneously with relations of power, yet not be entirely determined. As such, *rapport à soi* contributes to the possibility of an evaluation of power relations based on subjective experiences internal to particular historical and social contexts.

Ethical subjects

In his late work Foucault runs to the notion of *rapport à soi* – the reflexive relationship with oneself – as both the foundation of ethics and as the base of his idea

³²² Ibid., 75-76.

³²³ Ibid., 75. Indeed, Patton emphasizes the political necessity of this task: "if the experience of autonomy depends upon the larger networks of practice and social relations within which individuals act, but also upon the interpretative frameworks in terms of which they judge the success or failure of their acts, then maximizing autonomy requires practices of government of self and others which effectively enhance the feeling of power."

of ‘subjectivity.’ Foucault defines *rapport à soi* as follows: “the kind of relationship you ought to have with yourself, *rapport à soi*, which I call ethics, and which determines how the individual is supposed to constitute himself as a moral subject of his own actions.”³²⁴ On one hand, this relation to oneself is the focus of a domain of enquiry relatively independent of morality or moral systems, in the sense of a universal prescriptive or proscriptive moral code. He does not do away with this conception of morality, but poses ethics as *rapport à soi* as the alternative to this model and thinks that at different times in history, one or the other of these forms has been more heavily emphasized than the other. (As I detail further in Chapter Five, Foucault thinks that an ethic of the self founded on this idea of *rapport à soi* presents a viable alternative ethical model for the present age.) On the other hand, the concept of *rapport à soi* arises corollary to Foucault’s increased interest in the way that subjects constitute themselves, in contrast to the way they are made subjects through heteronomous exercises of power. It is the four-fold structure of *rapport à soi* that provides the framework for how Foucault conceptualizes the processes of self-constitution. But it also provides the framework for a re-thinking of the operation of power. The processes of *rapport à soi* are not independent of the socio-historical situation in which they are carried out. Rather, the reflexive relationship with self is bound within relations to others and even interconnected with the *rapport à soi* of other people.

The constitution of the self as an ethical subject: *rapport à soi*

Within the context of volumes two and three of *The History of Sexuality*, the explication of *rapport à soi* is the cornerstone of Foucault’s genealogy of the desiring subject.³²⁵ That is, of the analysis of the practices involved in the relationship of the self with self through which individuals understand themselves as subjects of desire. This genealogical analysis, Foucault thinks, is necessary in order to achieve the broader objective of these two volumes, namely, to understand how modern

³²⁴ Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” 352.

³²⁵ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, vol. 2 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 5. Foucault states: “This does not mean that I proposed to write a history of the successive conceptions of desire, of concupiscence, or of libido, but rather to analyze the practices by which individuals were led to focus their attention on themselves, to decipher, recognize, and acknowledge themselves as subjects of desire, *bringing into play between themselves and themselves a certain relationship* that allows them to discover, in desire, the truth of their being, be it natural or fallen [my emphasis].”

individuals have experienced themselves as subjects of ‘sexuality.’³²⁶ Thus he describes his aim: “I would like to show how, in classical Antiquity, sexual activity and sexual pleasures were problematized through practices of the self, bring into play the criteria of an ‘aesthetics of existence.’”³²⁷ Thus Foucault notes, “It seemed appropriate to look for the forms and modalities of the relation to self by which the individual constitutes and recognizes himself *qua* subject.”³²⁸ Methodologically, Foucault places these analyses at the intersection of the “archaeology of problematizations” and the “genealogy of practices of the self,” the consequence of which Foucault describes as the displacement of a history of moral systems with a “history of ethical problematizations based on practices of the self.”³²⁹ (I note this broader objective of the latter volumes of *The History of Sexuality* merely to note the context in which Foucault’s explication of *rapport à soi* is located.)

The explication and analysis of *rapport à soi*, however, has a much broader but nonetheless pivotal role in Foucault’s conceptions of ethics, particularly in the interplay of techniques of the self and techniques of power. This is itself connected to what Foucault means by ‘the subject’ and how he thinks about ‘subjectivity’ more broadly. The idea of a reflexive relationship with oneself can be seen as clarifying how it is that Foucault conceives of the reflexive interplay of the two aspects of the definition of ‘the subject’ that he provides, as we have seen, in ‘The Subject and Power.’³³⁰ *Rapport à soi*, as we see below, explains how it is that subjects are tied to their own identity by a conscience and self-knowledge, and provides the basis for Foucault’s analysis of the practices that come into play. But it also explains how Foucault thinks that our subjection to heteronomous forces comes into play and contributes to this reflexive identity. While Foucault’s later analyses in this regard tend to focus on positive and transformative external forces – like the guidance provided by a spiritual guide – nevertheless they also refer to the negative forces of subjection of discipline and normalization. In this way, *rapport à soi* also explains the interpretative and self-reflective dimensions that come into play when individuals evaluate the purpose, meaning and value of their actions through a broader framework of intelligibility, and that contributes to their ‘feeling of power.’

³²⁶ Ibid., 5-6.

³²⁷ Ibid., 12.

³²⁸ Ibid., 6.

³²⁹ Ibid., 13.

³³⁰ Cf. Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” 781.

In a similar way, the four-fold structure of *rapport à soi* is also the framework through which Foucault conceives of ethical relationships between people. As I argue below, the reflexive relationship with oneself arises out of relationships with others. What I seek to point out here and in the next section is the way that the structure of *rapport à soi* embeds our ‘subjectivity’ in relations with others and within the world. This is important for the arguments presented here for two reasons: first, in foregrounding the argument that runs throughout Chapters Four and Five, which defends Foucault against claims that his conception of ethics is ultimately egoistic. Second, it speaks to the reflective and interpretative dimensions that are essential for Foucault’s idea of critique, therefore providing the basis upon which individuals engage with the world and with politics.

Foucault thinks that there are three broad approaches that one could take when undertaking a history of ‘morality.’ These include a history of moral behaviours, which would be a study of specific actions and behaviour in response to given rules or codes, and a history of the codes themselves, which would be an analysis of a given system or code and its mode of operation within a given society. An investigation of ethics as founded in the reflexive relationship to self represents for Foucault the third possibility. This would be

a history of the way in which individuals are urged to constitute themselves as subjects of moral conduct [which] would be concerned with the models proposed for setting up and developing relationships with the self, for self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-examination, for the decipherment of the self by oneself, for the transformations that one seeks to accomplish with oneself as object. This last is what might be called a history of ‘ethics’ and ‘ascetics,’ understood as a history of the forms of moral subjectivation and of the practices of the self that are meant to ensure it.³³¹

At different times in a given society one of the elements might be emphasized over the others. As I suggested above, Foucault thinks that our own societies (in the West, at least) are gradually placing less emphasis on the first and second forms, with increasing attention paid to cultures and ethics of the self. As I note in Chapter Five,

³³¹ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 29.

Foucault claimed explicitly that we might adopt from ancient ethics the ideas of practices and care of the self.

But this is not to say that ethics as founded on the self is completely independent of these two other aspects of morality. An individual's *rapport à soi* is constituted in relation to what he calls the 'moral code' – which is, broadly speaking, made up of the moral and religious values and precepts, social rules, expectations and norms – of the society and culture in which that individual lives. From the outset, then, Foucault's conception of ethics as *rapport à soi* incorporates the broader social and cultural context as a constitutive component. He distinguishes between two forms of 'moral code.' The first – the codification of acts – is the over-arching prescriptive and prohibitive moral system particular to a specific social and historical situation, which determines which acts are permitted or forbidden.³³² In this sense 'morality' means, according to Foucault, "a set of values and rules of action that are recommended to individuals through the intermediary of various prescriptive agencies such as the family (in one of its roles), educational institutions, churches, and so forth."³³³ The second – the manner of observation – is the code that evaluates behaviour, rather than prescribing or prohibiting specific acts. In regard to this second form, morality refers to the way that individuals respond to and behave in relation to the prescriptive moral code. For Foucault, then, 'morality' refers to the "manner in which they comply more or less fully with a standard of conduct, the manner in which they obey or resist an interdiction or a prescription; the manner in which they respect or disregard a set of values."³³⁴

In this way, Foucault conceptualizes *rapport à soi* in terms of 'conduct.' Given the framework of intelligibility – the moral code – there is both a 'rule of conduct' (the prescription or interdiction) and 'actual conduct' (individuals' actual behaviour). That is, through *rapport à soi*, the individual constitutes their self as a subject in reference to this framework. Foucault states: "For a rule of conduct is one thing; but the conduct that may be measured by this rule is another. But another thing still is the manner in which one ought to 'conduct oneself'—that is, the manner in which one ought to form

³³² See Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 352.

³³³ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 25.

³³⁴ Ibid.

oneself as an ethical subject acting in reference to the prescriptive elements that make up the code.”³³⁵ Thus Foucault goes on:

Given a code of actions, and with regard to a specific type of actions (which can be defined by their degree of conformity with or divergence from the code), there are different ways to ‘conduct oneself’ morally, different ways for the acting individual to operate, not just as an agent, but as an ethical subject of this action.³³⁶

Foucault’s point here is that the kind of subject that one becomes depends not only on an action and the framework within which this action is carried out, but the manner in which one *relates* to oneself in terms of this action. Sebastian Harrer explains this usefully: “Two instances of a given type of action may be identical in respect of the positive properties that we may use to describe either of them; they may also be identical in respect of a moral law that they seem to abide by. However, the *relation to self* (*‘rapport à soi’*) that is involved in each of the two instances may be different in significant ways.”³³⁷ This will become clearer as we examine the four aspects of *rapport à soi* below. What is important to note here is that given Foucault’s employment of the term ‘conduct,’ *rapport à soi* can be understood as mediating the kind of subject one becomes in response to a field of possibilities.

Foucault describes *rapport à soi* as having four constitutive aspects, which Deleuze calls the ‘four folds.’³³⁸ The first of these aspects is the ‘ethical substance’; that is, the material, site or object that will form the focus of one’s attention and concern. This might include the subject’s thoughts, her ways of behaving, her manner of response to certain situations, and her feelings. In *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault describes this aspect of the relation to self as concerned with “the *determination of the ethical substance*; that is, the way in which the individual has to constitute this or that part of himself as the prime material of his moral conduct.”³³⁹ This involves the subject’s identification, through consciousness and self-knowledge, of that part or aspect of herself which requires attention, and so posits that part of herself as an object of her own knowledge and as the object of ethical exercises.

³³⁵ Ibid., 26.

³³⁶ Ibid.

³³⁷ Sebastian Harrer, “The Theme of Subjectivity in Foucault’s Lecture Series *L’Herméneutique du Sujet*,” in *Foucault Studies* 2 (2005), 79.

³³⁸ See Deleuze, *Foucault*, especially 94-123.

³³⁹ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 26.

The second aspect is the ‘mode of subjection,’ which is “the way in which the individual establishes his relation to the rule and recognizes himself as obliged to put it into practice”³⁴⁰ or “the way in which people are invited or incited to recognize their moral obligations.”³⁴¹ It is this aspect that refers to the subject’s self-conscious relation to the broader moral code, that incorporates not only the rules or values to which they subscribe or are subjected, but the reasons for that adherence. For example, there is a difference between choosing not to litter because one recognizes that littering is illegal (and is perhaps afraid of punishment) and not littering because one considers the environment valuable (and sees oneself as having a personal responsibility for maintaining one’s environment).

The third aspect of *rapport à soi*, as Foucault describes it, is ‘ethical work.’ This is the work that one “performs on oneself, not only in order to bring one’s conduct into compliance with a given rule, but to attempt to transform oneself into the ethical subject of one’s behaviour.”³⁴² This work encompasses the various practices that one performs or the techniques that one uses to effect change in area delimited as the ethical site. It is “the means by which we can change ourselves in order to become ethical subjects.”³⁴³ It is, simply, ‘what one does’ in order to become the kind of ethical subject one wants to be. This might be the activities one undertakes, such as meditation or the practices one adopts, such as vegetarianism. These refer generally to the ‘techniques of the self.’

The final aspect of *rapport à soi* is the ‘telos.’ This determines both the ethical site and the practices required; but it is more than simply the *aim* or *goal* of ethical practices. The *telos* places specific actions and exercises of self in relation to the other acts and exercises that together constitute an individual’s behaviour, and whereby it is attributed a status or value according to the individual’s overall behaviour and the mode of being to which they aim. Foucault writes that:

[A]n action is not only moral in itself, in its singularity; it is also moral in its circumstantial integration and by virtue of the place it occupies in a pattern of conduct. [...] A moral action tends towards its own accomplishment; but it also aims beyond the latter, to the

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 27.

³⁴¹ Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” 353.

³⁴² Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 27.

³⁴³ Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” 354-355.

establishing of a moral conduct that commits an individual, not only to other actions always in conformity with values and rules, but to a certain mode of being, a mode of being characteristic of the ethical subject.³⁴⁴

This passage is significant because it highlights that actions (as the ethical substance) are evaluated not only in terms of their specific relationship to the moral code (whether as an action it conforms or transgresses a particular prescription or interdict) but in terms of their contribution or subtraction from the variety and structure of an individual's total actions and the mode of being that they manifest.

It is the interrelation and interplay of these four elements that constitutes the reflexive relationship Foucault calls *rapport à soi*. Foucault provides the following summary, where *rapport à soi* is

not simply 'self-awareness' but self-formation as an 'ethical subject,' a process in which the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the precept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal. And this requires him to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself.³⁴⁵

The elements of *rapport à soi* ultimately describe the processes of self-subjection; the process through which individuals constitute *themselves* as subjects. As I argue further below, the structure of *rapport à soi* embeds the processes of self-subjection within the world. Indeed, it is this reflexive structure that allows Foucault to formulate an idea of 'the subject' or 'subjectivity' that moves away from the sovereign, founding subject to which Foucault was so hostile. Thus Foucault proposes his alternative formulation: "I think on the contrary that the subject is constituted through practices of subjection, or, in a more anonymous way, through practices of liberation, of freedom, as in Antiquity, starting of course from a number of rules, styles and conventions that are found in the culture."³⁴⁶

Foucault is thus explicit in stating that it is through *rapport à soi* that individuals both *constitute* and *recognize* themselves as subjects in reference to the

³⁴⁴ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 27-28.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 28.

³⁴⁶ Foucault, "An Aesthetics of Existence," 452.

broader social context in which they live and act. They act in reference to a broader framework of intelligibility, which in framing the meaning, purpose, and value of those actions affects how the individual is formed as a subject. Kim Atkins points out that this also involves the discursive field: “For Foucault, forms of subjectivity are determined by the rationality that is embedded in the discursive practices of the times and the subject-positions they articulate. Subjectivity is a discursive formation.”³⁴⁷ The social and cultural embeddedness of this self-relation is important because it is what provides meaning to the kinds of subject/s at which individuals aim and the practices through which they achieve this aim. But it also has implications for how Foucault conceives of politics and political action. As I argue in Chapter Five, Foucault conceives the political field discursively; that is, while the field itself arises from and is delimited by the network of social-power relations, he conceives of political activity and engagement primarily in discursive terms.

There is one final point to be noted at this stage. In rejecting the sovereign, founding subject, Foucault is also rejecting the idea that the subject is substantive. That is, although Foucault talks about ‘subjects’ he is not invoking the idea of a subject as a substantial, static or singular thing. He states clearly that the subject is “not a substance; it is a form and this form is not above all or always identical to itself.”³⁴⁸ What he means is that we are never just one kind of subject:

You do not have towards yourself the same kind of relationships when you constitute yourself as a political subject who goes and votes or speaks up in a meeting, and when you try to fulfil your desires in a sexual relationship. There are no doubt some relationships and some interferences between these two different kinds of subject but we are not in the presence of the same kind of subject. In each case, we play, we establish with one’s self some different form of relationship.³⁴⁹

Nor (and this is where the use of *telos* is liable to lead to misunderstanding) do we ever ‘become’ an ethical subject, in the sense that we do not ‘achieve’ or ‘complete’ the process of becoming subjects. We are incomplete and multiple: always in the process of becoming multiple subjects.

³⁴⁷ Kim Atkins, “Commentary on Foucault,” in *Self and Subjectivity*, ed. Kim Atkins (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 207.

³⁴⁸ Foucault, “The Ethic of Care,” 10.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

The fold of subjectivation: relations with others in the relation to self

The reflexive relationship with oneself is necessarily and inextricably embedded within social relationships. In this section, using the work of Gilles Deleuze and Judith Butler, I argue that relations with others are partly *constitutive* of *rapport à soi*. This has important implications not only for how we understand Foucault's 'subject,' as I argue here, but for his reformulation of the care of the self (as I argue in Chapter Four) and for the aesthetic aspects of his account of ethics (discussed in Chapter Five). Most significantly, it underpins the Foucaultian idea of the political, and accounts for how Foucault conceives our shared experience as subjects of power.

The body-subject represents a point of intersection within networks of power relations, upon which forces are exerted and through which 'the individual' emerges. As such, the body-subject represents the nexus of a certain number of power relations that mirror (or as Deleuze would describe them, are diagrammatic of) the network of social relations in which that individual lives. As Deleuze notes, power "passes not so much through forms as through particular *points* which on each occasion mark the application of a force, the action or reaction of a force in relation to others."³⁵⁰ For Deleuze 'subjectivation' – the process by which subjects are constituted – occurs through the folding-back of relations of force (of the 'outside'). He writes, "It is as if the relations of the outside folded back to create a doubling, allow a relation to oneself to emerge, and constitute an inside which is hollowed out and develops its own unique dimension."³⁵¹ It is this folding-back of force relations that gives rise to the reflexive relation – the 'fold' – of *rapport à soi*. The fold establishes the 'inside' of the reflexive relation to self and the 'outside' of differential relations as mutually delimiting. According to Deleuze, "The outside is not a fixed limit but a moving matter animated by peristaltic movement, folds and foldings that together make up an inside: they are not something other than the outside, but precisely the inside *of* the outside."³⁵² This 'inside' evokes the classical notion of interiority, as Deleuze suggests: "This is what the Greeks did: they folded force, even though it still remained force. They made it relate back to itself. Far from ignoring interiority, individuality, or subjectivity they invented the subject, but only as a derivative or the product of a 'subjectivation.'"³⁵³

³⁵⁰ Deleuze, *Foucault*, 73.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 100.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 97.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, 101.

The reflexivity of the fold that Deleuze identifies as constitutive of *rapport à soi* is actually prefigured in *Discipline and Punish*, where the disciplinary individual emerges through the internalisation – the folding back – of the panoptic gaze.³⁵⁴ For Butler, the reflexivity characteristic of *rapport à soi* arises through the individual's relation to 'social norms': "reflexivity emerges in the act of taking up a relation to moral codes. [...] The subject forms itself in relation to a set of codes, prescriptions, or norms."³⁵⁵ Or, as Colwell puts it, subjects arise as differential relations to themselves *within* a differential system of power relations.³⁵⁶ In this way Butler reads the 'mode of subjection' as the primary constitutive element of *rapport à soi*: as a primary relation through which the reflexive relation to self is established. The self-forming activities and practices of *rapport à soi* are conducted in tension with the subjectivising effects of the relation to these norms: "This work on the self, this act of delimiting, takes place within the context of a set of norms that precede and exceed the subject. These are invested with power and recalcitrance, setting the limits to what will be considered to be an intelligible formation of the subject within a given historical scheme of things."³⁵⁷ Thus for Foucault, challenging these limits of intelligibility will be one of the primary aims of subjects' political activity. Indeed, as I suggested above, the initial and primary mode of such activity is discursive, since the intelligibility of actions and behaviours are primarily characterised discursively.

For both Deleuze and Butler, the external relations through which the reflexive relation arises are primary to the relation one has with oneself. For Deleuze "the inside will always be the doubling of the outside".³⁵⁸ the differential relations of the outside are primary and this primacy cannot be reversed. For Butler, similarly, the relation to the norm is originary: it "inaugurates reflexivity."³⁵⁹ In this way, *rapport à soi* is always constituted and delimited by relations with others. Foucault's ethical subject, then, is in relation to others before being in relation to itself. Indeed, it is through the

³⁵⁴ "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection." Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 202-203.

³⁵⁵ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 16-17.

³⁵⁶ Colwell, "The Retreat of the Subject," 58. Colwell notes: "The subject is a differential effect of a differential field of power relations that has no originary locus, no point of reference on which to hang a nature."

³⁵⁷ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 17.

³⁵⁸ Deleuze, *Foucault*, 99.

³⁵⁹ See Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 19.

concept of *rapport à soi*, that Foucault posits the subject or individual as essentially ‘relational’ or ‘inter-subjective.’ In this way, the self-relation incorporates *alterité* (otherness). Hofmeyr notes that: “Every self-crafting nodal point [in the network of power relations] is in constant contact with the *provisional* alterity of heteronomous forces and with what Levinas might have called the ‘*absolute*’ alterity of other selves.”³⁶⁰ If the relation to self is formed through the folding-back of outside differential relations, then interiority is formed through the doubling or bending of the outside. *Alterité* is thus an essential constitutive element of interiority.

Significantly, however, the ‘inside,’ while arising through the fold of force relations, is not *determined* by those forces; it is a ‘new dimension.’³⁶¹ It is through this new dimension that *rapport à soi* enables work upon the self and self-constitution outside the bounds of, and even in resistance to, relations of power. “Foucault’s fundamental idea,” Deleuze argues, “is that of a dimension of subjectivity derived from power and knowledge without being dependent on them.”³⁶² Similarly, Butler argues that “the norm does not produce the subject as its necessary effect, nor is the subject fully free to disregard the norm that inaugurates its reflexivity; one invariably struggles with conditions of one’s life that one could not have chosen.”³⁶³ It is this reflexive dimension of subjectivity that is deployed in practices of the self, and similarly against the subjectivising effects of disciplinary and other forms of power.

The self-reflective and interpretative dimensions of *rapport à soi* link back to Foucault’s characterization of thought. Recalling Foucault’s description, thought is what enables one to “step back from this way of acting or reacting” and to present one’s conduct to oneself in order to “question it as to its meaning, its conditions, and its goals.”³⁶⁴ Thought is what enables one to reflect on one’s behaviour and conduct as a *problem* and is itself a practice of freedom.³⁶⁵ Practices are themselves inscribed by thought, as Foucault notes.³⁶⁶ Thought is thus an integral aspect of *rapport à soi*, in

³⁶⁰ A. B. Hofmeyr, “The meta-physics of Foucault’s ethics: Succeeding where Levinas fails,” in *South African Journal of Philosophy* 25, no. 2 (2006), 122.

³⁶¹ See Deleuze, *Foucault*, 101.

³⁶² *Ibid.*

³⁶³ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 19. In this more recent work it is clear that Butler has re-evaluated aspects of Foucault’s work, providing an altogether more sympathetic reading than in texts referred to in Chapter One.

³⁶⁴ Foucault, “Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations,” 117.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁶ See Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, 334. For Béatrice Han, the idea that the definition of subjectivation is the reflective constitution of the self through thought is problematic. She

that in order to form the sort of reflexive relation to self in reference and relation to one's actions and behaviour, one must be, as it were, able to step back from those actions and the aim of those actions, in order to reflect upon them and so form oneself in a particular relation to them. In this way, thought and the critical relation to oneself that it engenders are essential to *rapport à soi*, which together form the basis of an elaboration of a critical relation to the world. It is the capacity to be critical that establishes this reflexive aspect of *rapport à soi* as a subjective dimension not determined by the conditions from which it emerges.

Conclusion

In this way, Foucault escapes critical interpretations that see his account of disciplinary power as leading to one of two opposing options. The body is neither a bearer of values that pre-exist relations of power, nor is the subject entirely determined. It is by reading the operation of relations of power in conjunction to the concept of *rapport à soi* that we can account for a body-subject that emerges within networks of power, yet which is not completely determined by them. The body-subject, as we have seen, emerges within networks of power relations. Foucault's account of *rapport à soi* supports a re-interpretation of docile bodies that supports the idea that disciplinary power presupposes subjective experience of its mechanisms. Most importantly, however, this reading of *rapport à soi* goes some way in explaining how it is that body-subjects' skills and capacities can emerge *within* networks of power relations, yet not be entirely *produced* by those relations.

Rapport à soi is essential to understanding how Foucault's account of power as pervasive, de-identified from the state, and operating at all levels of social organisation is compatible with a relatively self-determining subject. Bodies are never just bodies: they are always body-subjects. The 'point' upon which power is exercised is always already a body-subject; the very efficacy of techniques of power depends on

argues that under this conception, "Thought thus appears to designate an interpretation of the self and world which is carried by the mode of being of the subject ('ways of saying, doing, behaving'), which preexists any conscious elaboration of what it is. It should not be understood in reference to the theoretical order of knowledge, but from habitual and nonreflective human practices." (Han, *Foucault's Critical Project*, 189.) She goes on: "Thus, thought is immanent to our practices themselves, and therefore, far from being neutral or from making sense only from the reflective and voluntary activity of the subject (which would make us 'believe in what we think' or 'admit what we do'), intrinsically involves an understanding of what man and his relationship to the world are." (Ibid.)

subjective experience of those techniques. As we have seen, this is particularly the case in the operation of disciplinary power, which relies on the individual becoming an agent and instrument of their own subjection.

In this way, Foucault's account of *rapport à soi* contributes to a 'fuller' account of human subjectivity, but in a way that does not commit Foucault to an *a priori* account of the subject. The four constitutive elements of *rapport à soi* incorporate the interpretative and self-reflective dimensions that Patton identifies. The structure of *rapport à soi* captures the interpretive frameworks in which our actions are carried out, such that these frameworks are bound within the very constitution of the self.

This account of *rapport à soi* has several significant implications, which I take up in the following chapters. First, the structural interdependence of *rapport à soi* with relations with others bears particularly on Foucault's reformulation of the theme of the care for the self, which I address in the next chapter. The issue at stake in this chapter is whether Foucault's account sufficiently acknowledges the ethical authority of 'the Other.' I suggest that the structural interrelation of the relation to self with relations to others casts new light over Foucault's claim that care for the self must take precedence over care for others. Second, that the description of the operation of disciplinary power as 'fixing' subject-functions to the somatic singularity read in conjunction with *rapport à soi* may allow a certain conception of situational norms. This offers one avenue for reconciling Foucault's occasional use of normative language with his explicit rejections of *a priori* normative values and universalist accounts of ethics. Of most significance for an ethic of power, however, is the way that *rapport à soi* forms the foundation of how Foucault conceives of the nature of political activity, particularly in enabling a situational and critical response to the world and to the discursive conditions of one's own intelligibility.

Chapter Four: Ethical frameworks

Introduction

This chapter has two primary aims. First, to set out the ethical framework within which my later arguments about the ethical and political implications of Foucault's project rest. Second, to address certain criticisms from Chapter One: namely, the broad claim that Foucault's ethics is egoistic and too self-concerned. The chapter is divided into four sections.

In the first two sections I examine the ethical implications of the account of *rapport à soi* developed in Chapter Three, read in conjunction with certain aspects of Foucault's account of the ancient Greek notion of the care for the self [*epimeleia heautou*]. While the concept of *rapport à soi* does enable the articulation of a self-constituting subject of power, the centrality of 'the self' to ethics implied by this concept places the value of this move into question. This problem is given more weight by a late interview in which Foucault appears to relegate other people to a secondary ethical status, placing the importance of care for oneself above care for others.

In the first section I focus on the implications of *rapport à soi* for how we conceive of the nature of ethical relationships between individuals, and for Foucault's idea of subjectivity more generally. Particularly, the relational nature of *rapport à soi* appears to imply a reasonably strong inter-subjectivity, which places in question Foucault's views on ontological separation. Along these lines we can read the inter-relational nature of *rapport à soi* to mean that in caring for oneself, one not only *enables* the capacity to care for others, but that one actually cares for others *by virtue of* caring for oneself. This reading is complicated when Foucault provides an apparently contradictory account of the care for the self. In light of this, I suggest that Foucault's insistence on the imperative of care for oneself should thus be taken to indicate a 'structural' primacy of self over others. Yet this does not preclude the simultaneous interpretation that the self is made the primary focus of ethics.

In the second section I turn to the broader ethical context of these questions, by considering Foucault's account of the relationship between *rapport à soi* and care for

others from a broadly Levinasian perspective. In doing so, I address the Levinas-inspired criticisms (introduced in part three of Chapter One) that see this argument as indicating a serious lack of ethical regard for others. I argue that rather than bearing upon the spirit of Foucault's account of ethics, his idea that care for oneself must precede care for others is founded on the structural primacy of *rapport à soi*. As such, Foucault's emphasis on the precedence of care for oneself over care for others does not indicate such a disregard, but rather a practical approach to the ethics of self-constitution that recognizes that the capacity to care for others follows from proper care for oneself.

In the third section, I consider whether the apparent absence of ethical universalism in Foucault's account necessarily precludes a serious ethical orientation towards others. Foucault's objections to ethical universalism are well known, based primarily on the idea that universalism necessarily commits individuals to a limited number of possible modes of being. In surveying his rejection of a universalist framework, I argue that Foucault's descriptions of subjects of power *do* allow for a minimalist form of universalism, but which does not lead to the consequences Foucault found so problematic. Building on Christopher Cordner's idea of a 'universalism of outlook,' I suggest that *rapport à soi* can in fact form the foundation of such an outlook. Specifically, that the recognition of other people as subjects of, and as subject to, power forms the foundation of the minimalist universalism required for an ethic of power.

Finally, I turn in the fourth section to the question of whether *rapport à soi* and the associated notion of 'subject-positions' can found a situationally-specific account of social norms. That is, social norms for behaviour are embedded within networks of power relations and corresponding subject positions in which a subject finds herself. It is a norm to the extent that there are certain expectations and rules for behaviour associated with a particular subject-position, which is defined relationally within a network of power relations. Drawing on Judith Butler's analysis in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, and building on the analysis of *rapport à soi* in Chapter Three, I suggest that contrary to the apparent centrality of the self, Foucault's account of the latter is founded partly on social norms, which save it from claims of egoism.

Before turning to these appraisals, two points should be noted. First, the significance of the ancient Greek notion of the care of the self [*epimeleia heautou*] to Foucault's broader project, particularly with regard to the arguments presented here.

This notion is one of the central themes of Foucault's last works and lectures. As McGushin observes, ancient philosophy for Foucault can be ultimately comprehended as "a vast project of inventing, defining, elaborating, and *practicing* a complex 'care of the self.'"³⁶⁷ Foucault turned to Antiquity for a possible mode of response to an empty ethic of the self: for an organizing theme that could re-institute meaning and ethical integrity to a culture of the self that has become marked and dragged down by individualism. As I argue in Chapter Five, his analyses of the care for the self form part of the more general project of offering a modern audience the groundwork required for developing a modern ethic of the self. But it is not presented as a given, pre-prepared answer to a modern problem. As I point out, Foucault emphasizes that we should not return to a theme such as the care for self as though returning to a path from which we have strayed; the idea of care for the self should be adapted to meet the specific needs of the modern world. He suggests, speaking of the care for the self, "Nothing is more foreign to me than the idea that philosophy strayed at a certain moment of time, and that it has forgotten something and that somewhere in her history there exists a principle, a basis that must be rediscovered."³⁶⁸ Nevertheless, in the *Hermeneutics* lectures Foucault characterizes the phenomenon of care of the self in Antiquity as a "decisive moment" in the history of thought "that is still significant for our modern mode of being subjects."³⁶⁹ It thus forms part of his genealogy of the modern Western subject, and shares the political stakes of this genealogy. Indeed, it is in its political implications that care for the self is still relevant and significant for a modern audience.

Second, the relationship between the care of the self and the critical attitude. Foucault describes the care of the self as both an attitude – to care for something or be concerned with something – and an activity: "it [*epimeleia heautou*] describes a sort of work, an activity; it implies attention, knowledge, technique."³⁷⁰ It is essentially a stance or mode of relation that one takes toward oneself, in relation to truth, in relation to techniques of power, and in relations to others. It is also an activity that encompasses a range of practices. Foucault describes it further:

In short, with this notion of *epimeleia heautou* [care of the self] we

³⁶⁷ McGushin, *Foucault's Askēsis*, 3.

³⁶⁸ Foucault, "The Ethic of Care," 14.

³⁶⁹ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 9.

³⁷⁰ Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 360. In French, *le souci de soi* – also the title of the third volume of *The History of Sexuality* – is literally 'care of self' or 'self-care.'

have a body of work defining a way of being, a standpoint, forms of reflection, and practices which make it an extremely important phenomenon not just in the history of representations, notions, or theories, but in the history of subjectivity itself or, if you like, in the history of practices of subjectivity.³⁷¹

From this passage it is clear that the theme of care for the self is part of Foucault's genealogy of the subject. It is essentially concerned with the emergence of subjects. It refers to the work or techniques by which subjects are produced, and refers to overarching principles, discourses and formations of power-knowledge in a given society. By describing it in this way, the theme of care for the self appears to overlap with *rappor à soi*, especially in referring to a mode of being and to 'work' or 'practices.' Yet the concept of *rappor à soi*, I suggested earlier, is primarily structural. It represents how Foucault thinks about the emergence and structure of 'subjects of power' and thus of a situated subjectivity. In contrast, the care for the self is essentially an 'ethos': an attitude and mode of relation to the world. While it does incorporate a range of practices, these are governed by and cement the subject's relation to the world. As Foucault describes it, the care for the self is a "theme of a general standpoint, of a certain way of considering things, of behaving in the world, undertaking actions, and having relations with other people."³⁷² Understood in this way, I suggest, the care for the self should be read within Foucault's project as the overarching ethos that governs *rappor à soi*, and which gives further complexity and richness to the idea of a situated subjectivity.

Read in conjunction with his description of the critical attitude and related conception of thought, the practices of care for the self emerge as activities that cultivate the 'right' to question authority on its relation to truth. For example, Foucault argues that "The care for the self implies a certain way of attending to what we think and what takes place in our thought."³⁷³ It implies reflection upon one's place and role within the world and in relation to others. In characterising its role, Foucault evokes the Socratic gadfly, describing the precept of care for the self as "a sort of thorn which must be stuck in men's flesh, driven into their existence, and which is a principle of

³⁷¹ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 11. Foucault thus places his analyses of the different manifestations of care for the self as part of his 'history of thought' and his genealogy and hermeneutics of the subject.

³⁷² Ibid., 10.

³⁷³ Ibid., 11.

restlessness and movement, of continuous concern throughout life.”³⁷⁴ In this way, care for the self should be read not only as referring to the ethos and ethical practices that develop and transform one’s *rapport à soi*, but as part of how Foucault conceives the subject’s cultivation of their right to question the relationship between authority and truth.

The politics of Foucault’s ethics

At the end of Chapter Three I argued that his later account of *rapport à soi* enables Foucault to better articulate how individuals can be ‘produced’ by disciplinary power, but without leading to the conclusion that individuals are therefore entirely determined by power. *Rapport à soi* further allows Foucault to articulate a concept of subjectivity that strikes a balance between the subjectivation (*assujettissement*) of heteronomous exercises of power and the subject’s capacity for self-constitution. It is the ‘subjective dimension’ (to adopt Deleuze’s term) that founds the capacity for original and spontaneous responses to power. Yet, if we take a step back from this particular idea and consider it within Foucault’s account of ethics more broadly it does raise certain questions about the broader ethical, philosophical and political commitments of Foucault’s project. These are exemplified in the problem of Foucault’s apparent disregard for the status of other human beings as ends in themselves, and who are ethically significant and valuable.

This problem arises in part from Foucault’s positing *rapport à soi* as the defining feature of ethics, as noted in Chapter Three. Recalling this definition, he suggests that ethics refers to the reflexive relationship with oneself whereby the subject constitutes herself as a subject of her own actions.³⁷⁵ Although this characterisation in itself is not particularly objectionable, it is in reading this definition in the context of the ‘care for the self’ that Foucault’s account begins to appear heavily weighted toward ‘the self.’ As such, the centrality that Foucault gives to this theme and to *rapport à soi* within his later work over-emphasises the importance of the ‘self,’ and appears to lead to an egoistic, if not solipsistic, account of ‘ethics.’

This problem is compounded by a late interview, in which Foucault argues that: “One must not have the care for others precede the care for self. The care for self takes

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 8.

³⁷⁵ See Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” 352.

moral precedence in the measure that the relationship to self takes ontological precedence.”³⁷⁶ Here Foucault indeed appears to place the self as the primary focus of ethics: the care for oneself must take priority over care for others. This ‘precedence’ can be understood in two ways. First, it could be taken to mean that care for oneself is primary, in the sense of importance or significance. Under this reading, the self would be the primary focus of ethics, where care for others is of secondary or subordinate importance. Second, it could be taken to mean that care for oneself is somehow a condition of care for others, whereby one must care of oneself *in order to* enable the capacity to care for others. Yet these two interpretations are by no means mutually opposed. Indeed, one might say that care for oneself is more important *and* that it enables the capacity to care for others.

In addition, this claim appears initially inconsistent with the account of *rapport à soi* provided in Chapter Three. The latter, as we have seen, posits the reflexive relationship with oneself as arising out of originary relations with others. As such, *these relations* would seem to take ontological precedence. Furthermore, such a reading would suggest a far more relational ontology than Foucault’s claim to the ontological precedence of the relationship with oneself would otherwise suggest. Indeed, there are times when Foucault’s characterisation of the relation of care for others to care for oneself would appear to support a more relational ontology. For example, Foucault suggests that “Care for self is ethical in itself, but it implies complex relations with others, in the measure where this *ethos* of freedom is also a way of caring for others.”³⁷⁷ This does suggest that Foucault thinks there is a degree of confluence between care for self and care for others. That is, in undertaking the various activities and practices that constitute the care for the self, one cares for others at the same time. Such a reading actually turns on the inter-relational structure of *rapport à soi*. Because the originary relations of *rapport à soi* are folded into the latter, the activities of care that tend this reflexive relation at the same time tend these originary relations. Hofmeyr describes this usefully:

[If] the inside is constituted by the folding of the outside, the constituent ‘parts’ – the self and what lies beyond the limits of the self – must be interrelated or arranged in such a way that they are in

³⁷⁶ Foucault, “The Ethic of Care,” 7.

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

contact. [...] And thus by caring for myself, I necessarily also take responsibility for the other. The limits of the self are enlarged to make room for the other as other.³⁷⁸

Under this reading of the Deleuzian fold, relations with others become a constituent part of my self-relation. Hofmeyr goes a step further and posits a strong inter-subjective reading that blurs the ontological separation of human beings. Even if we do not go this far, through the inter-relational structure of *rapport à soi* care for others would not only be entailed by, but co-extensive with, the care that one takes for oneself. Nehamas too supports this reading, arguing that care of the self not only precedes but *constitutes* care for the other.³⁷⁹ Indeed, Foucault notes that “the one who cared for himself correctly found himself, *by that very fact*, in a measure to behave correctly in relationship to others and for others [my italics].”³⁸⁰ This not only implies a stronger inter-subjective reading of the concept of *rapport à soi*, but places in question Foucault’s views on ontological separation. Thus we can read the inter-relational nature of *rapport à soi* to mean that in caring for oneself, one not only *enables* the capacity to care for others, but that one actually cares for others *by virtue of* caring for oneself.

To further understand the implications of this point, it is helpful to consider how Foucault actually conceives of the operation of care for self – or *askēsis* more generally – in relation to *rapport à soi*. To explain this operation, I turn to Foucault’s account of writing as a technique of the self. Foucault thinks that a particular *rapport à soi* can be affected or ‘shaped’ by practices of the self. This ‘shaping,’ according to Foucault, involves the incorporation or assimilation of truths or principles as part of the subject. The practice of writing, for example, functions as *askēsis*, whereby certain truths, discourses, or principles are fashioned through writing into rational principles for action: writing is an “agent of the transformation of truth into *ethos*.”³⁸¹ Both reading and writing operate as modes of ‘inscription’: the embodiment of the content of what is read and written. Through these activities, Foucault argues, the subject makes this content part of itself; it is the process of the “subjectivation of

³⁷⁸ Hofmeyr, “The *meta*-physics of Foucault’s ethics,” 123.

³⁷⁹ Alexander Nehamas, “A Fate for Socrates’ Reason: Foucault on the Care of the Self,” in *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 167.

³⁸⁰ Foucault, “The Ethic of Care,” 7.

³⁸¹ Foucault, “Self-Writing,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 209.

discourse.”³⁸² Foucault argues moreover that reading and writing thus *shape* the self.³⁸³ The subject’s *rapport à soi* is refined, structured or ‘shaped’ through the incorporation and assimilation – the *subjectivation* – of discourses or truths.

Foucault poses this subjectivation as a process of unification that brings together and combines the disparate elements that make up the *hupomnemata* (these are account books, public registers, or individual notebooks – that can serve as ‘books of life’ and ‘guides for conduct’³⁸⁴) within the subject. Indeed, Foucault turns to the notion of ‘alimentation’ to explicate this process. The content of what is read and written, according to Foucault’s account, is ‘absorbed’ into the subject:

The role of writing is to constitute, along with all that reading has constituted, a ‘body.’ [...] And this body should be understood not as a body of doctrine but, rather—following an often-evoked metaphor of digestion—as the very body of the one who, by transcribing his readings, has appropriated them and made their truth his own: writing transforms the thing seen or heard ‘into tissue and blood.’ [...] It becomes a principle of rational action in the writer himself.³⁸⁵

Thus the truths, principles and discourses read and written about are incorporated and ultimately *assimilated* into the subject’s *rapport à soi*. While this supports the idea that the subjective dimension is ‘shaped’ or ‘cultivated’ by practices of the self, its consequences for the extent to which *rapport à soi* should be understood as indicating a relational ontology are not yet clear. I return to this point shortly.

One of the consequences of this idea for Foucault is the idea that in incorporating principles of action into the very mode of being of the subject, through *rapport à soi* the subject is able to respond to a variety of situations and circumstances. (Here Foucault displays his preference for principles for action based on individual ethics rather than obedience to moral codes. I turn to this in later chapters.) As such, Foucault adopts the idea that practices of the self can enable the relationship with oneself to operate as a ‘guide’ or ‘manual’ for future behaviour.

³⁸² Ibid., 210.

³⁸³ “The movement they [the activities of reading and writing] seek to bring about is the reverse of that [confession]: the intent is not to pursue the unspeakable, nor to reveal the hidden, nor to say the unsaid, but on the contrary to capture the already-said, to collect what one has managed to hear or read, and for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self.” (Ibid., 210-211.)

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 209.

Foucault's use of 'manual' and 'treatise' is significant.³⁸⁶ To describe regimen as forming a 'manual' not only suggests a guide or set of instructions for behaviour, but that the very practices themselves 'inscribe' the subject in such a way as to inform future behaviour and practices.³⁸⁷ It is a matter of establishing such a strong relationship between the subject and truth to enable the subject, "when he had attained his finished form, to have at his disposal the true discourse that he should have and keep ready to hand and which he could say to himself as an aid when needed."³⁸⁸ Foucault points to ancient dietetic practices to make the same point. The value of the dietetic account for Foucault is that it establishes *rapport à soi* and the resulting *ēthos* as the foundation for ethical behaviour.³⁸⁹ The 'rules' of dietetics (the mode of subjection) are not universal or unchanging; they depend on the specific situation of an individual at a given time and in a given place; they respond to unique circumstances. In this way, Foucault conceives of dietetics in terms of a broader manual or guide for living. He states, for example, that: "Regimen should not be understood as a corpus of universal and uniform rules; it was more in the nature of a manual for reacting to situations in which one might find oneself, a treatise for adjusting one's behaviour to fit the circumstances."³⁹⁰ Foucault thus adopts the idea that techniques and practices of the self – regimen – effectively 'embody' their overarching principles, discourses and rationalities.

It is in the idea that a rationality for behaviour can be incorporated into the subject that Foucault locates the link between the government of self and the government of others. In conceiving of how rulers should conduct themselves,

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 213.

³⁸⁶ Foucault uses '*une sorte de manuel*', '*un traite*' and '*regime*.' (See 'Dietetique' in *L'Usage des plaisirs*, vol. 2 of *Histoire de la sexualité* [Paris: Gallimard, 1984], 121.)

³⁸⁷ "The thing to note [...] is the concern it [regimen] shows—one that was shared by ethics and medicine—with preparing the individual for a multitude of possible circumstances." (Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 105-106.)

³⁸⁸ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 371.

³⁸⁹ He argues that "A regimen was not good if it only permitted one to live in one place, with one type of food, and if it did not allow one to be open to any change. The usefulness of a regimen lay precisely in the possibility it gave individuals to face different situations." (Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 105.)

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 106. Dietetic practices, then, also act as preparatory training for situations beyond their initial concern with the body. "In short, the practice of regimen as an art of living [...] was a whole manner of forming oneself as a subject who had the proper, necessary, and sufficient concern for his body. A concern that permeated everyday life, making the major or common activities of existence a matter both of health and of ethics. It defined a circumstantial strategy involving the body and the elements that surrounded it; and finally, it proposed to equip the individual himself for a rational mode of behaviour." (Ibid., 108.)

Foucault suggests that “It is in knowing how properly to conduct himself that he will be able to lead others properly. [...] The rationality of the government of others is the same as the rationality of the government of oneself.”³⁹¹ Indeed, Foucault emphasises this more inter-subjective reading – where one cares for others by virtue of caring for oneself – in aspects of his analyses of government. Much of his work in the last two years of lectures at the Collège de France is dedicated to explicating the idea that the government of others is inextricably bound to the government of oneself.³⁹²

We here return to the question of what Foucault means when he suggests that care for oneself must precede care for others. As demonstrated above, there is reasonable evidence to suggest that *rapport à soi* should be seen as supporting an inter-subjective reading of ethics, and a more relational ontology than one would otherwise expect. Yet in claiming that the relationship with oneself must take ‘ontological’ precedence, Foucault complicates this reading; it suggests that the self is ontologically distinct. Again, Foucault might be merely pointing to the fact of our ontological separation from others and to the subsequent fact that care for oneself takes a distinct form from care for others. Alternatively, it may be that he is pointing to the ontological necessity of caring for oneself before one can care for others.

It is clear from the above that care for others and the care of the self are fundamentally linked. But this is not because human subjects are ontologically indistinct. What the account of the operation of dietetic and writing practices illustrates is that Foucault thinks that care for the self enables, or, is the condition of, care for others, in the sense that the practices of self cultivate the capacity to care for others. The alimentary model of writing practices shows that it is in forming a particular *rapport à soi* – and shaping the subjective dimension – that care for others becomes possible. As McGushin notes, “In Socratic thought, the care of the self was a preparatory work through which one established the proper rapport with oneself. This relationship to oneself was what gave one the capacity to take up the arts of living, to

³⁹¹ Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, vol. 3 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 89. This is part of Foucault’s account of the increased emphasis on the relationship to oneself as the foundation of proper government of others and political activity. “It is the modality of a rational being, and not the qualification of a status that establishes and ought to determine, in their concrete form, relations between the governors and the governed.” (Ibid., 91.)

³⁹² See Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France 1982-1983*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); and *The Courage of Truth*.

understand their value, to be able to apply them properly.”³⁹³ In this way, the ontological separation of subjects is maintained while *rapport à soi* provides the foundation for a conception of ethical self-formation that cultivates the subject’s capacity to respond to various situations and to others according to her *ēthos*.

This reading is thus inconsistent with Hofmeyr’s idea that *rapport à soi* marks a certain inter-subjectivity which entails care for others in the care one takes for oneself. Under this reading, as we have seen, practices of the self ‘shape’ *rapport à soi* in such a way as to redefine or affect the point of delimitation between the subject’s *rapport à soi* and her relations with others. While this explains the precedence that care for oneself must take, such a relational account is inconsistent with the ontological separation implied by Foucault’s statement. If subjects are ontologically distinct from one another, it seems difficult to argue that care for others is not only enabled by, but is constituted through, the care for self.

However, this difficulty can be avoided by pointing out that the inter-relational nature of *rapport à soi* does not necessarily imply that individual subjects are ontologically indistinct. That is, that the reflexive relationship with oneself arises out of relations with others does not mean that such subjects are therefore not ontologically separated from one other. We could say both that we are distinct beings *and* that our *rapport à soi* is bound in relations with others. Under this reading, the precedence of care for self would be precisely *because* of our distinctness as beings: care for oneself would be required to take precedence because it cultivates the capacity to care for others. However, Cordner’s critical point remains; while caring for oneself enables one to care for others, and while this would explain Foucault’s insistence on the ontological precedence of care for oneself, there is no necessary link between the two. Care for others is enabled by care for oneself, but it is not guaranteed. One does not care for others *by virtue of* the care for self.

In light of this, I suggest that Foucault’s insistence on the imperative of care for oneself should thus be taken to indicate a ‘structural’ primacy of self over others. All this means is that the capacity to care for others is conditional upon the care for self. Yet, this does not preclude the possible interpretation that this precedence also implies that the self is ethically more important than others. But what does this mean for Foucault’s idea that care for others and government of others is tied to how one cares

³⁹³ McGushin, *Foucault’s Askēsis*, 37.

and governs oneself? In the next section I turn to the broader ethical context of these questions, by considering Foucault's account of the relationship between *rapport à soi* and care for others from a broadly Levinasian perspective.

Into the fold: alterity and difference

As I have demonstrated above, the inter-relational nature of *rapport à soi* does not imply a similarly relational ontology; Foucault maintains the ontological distinctness of human beings. While I have shown that Foucault's claim to the precedence of care for the self refers to a structural primacy – in the sense that the subjective dimension of *rapport à soi* must be cultivated in order to care for others – the question remains as to whether this also implies that the self is ethically more significant. That is, whether the practices, objectives and values of one's own life and mode of being are more important than those of other people. Foucault has been criticised for precisely this point; his claim to precedence of care for oneself has been taken to signify an ethics overly pre-occupied with the self. Read in conjunction with his emphasis on the importance of aesthetic practices, moreover, it has been taken as representing a thoroughly egoistic ethics. (I discuss the political implications of Foucault's emphasis on aesthetic practices in Chapter Five.) Before turning to the underlying philosophical position at stake in this discussion, I consider first the foundations of this critical reading.

As already suggested above, the primary reason for this view is that an ethics founded on the concepts of *rapport à soi* and the care for the self is too 'self-centred.' Such an ethics fails to recognise the ethical primacy of other people. The problem with Foucault's account then is not only the apparent prioritisation of care for self, but, given the explanation that this is merely a *structural* primacy, there is no sense in which care for other people is *necessary*. Thus it is not enough to say that the practices and activities of care for the self must take precedence because they cultivate the capacity to care for others. While it is clear that care for the self does not preclude care for others, as Cordner points out, and indeed while it may lead to care for others, the central problem with Foucault's account is that care for the self does not appear to *entail* care for others.³⁹⁴ Moreover, in positing *rapport à soi* as the foundation of our

³⁹⁴ See Cordner, "Foucault, Ethics and the Other," 6.

ethical responsiveness, care for others becomes one possible mode of response amongst many, rather than an example of “what is fundamental to ethics.”³⁹⁵

This line of criticism tends to presuppose a Levinas-inspired ethical orientation toward others. For Emmanuel Levinas, it is the non-reciprocal responsibility that we bear for the Other that is at the heart of the ethical relationship. Ethics comes into play in the ‘calling into question’ of the Same brought about by the Other.³⁹⁶ From this perspective, Foucault’s account of care for others can only be genuine if it reflects a prior normative foundation that posits others at the centre and very *raison d’être* of ethics. An account of ethical relationships between human beings must do more than guarantee that others will be cared for by virtue of the care for self. It must posit other people as the source of meaning to and the primary objective of ethical behaviour.³⁹⁷ On this view, my consideration and responsibility towards other people must be the primary motivation of my actions, rather than a corollary outcome of them.

This is not to say that *rapport à soi* completely fails to account for or to acknowledge others. Cordner’s point is that under Foucault’s account, care for others only comes into play through the primacy of one’s relation to self.³⁹⁸ This does not necessarily discount Foucault’s conception of *rapport à soi* from having any value for ethics; indeed Cordner thinks that *rapport à soi* goes some way in recognizing ‘the other’ as a source of meaning to our ethical behaviour.³⁹⁹ But it does not go far enough. The failure to posit other people as the primary source of meaning to ethics calls into question the extent to which the subject can be thought to be *responsible* to others. The criticisms levelled at Foucault in regard to his emphasis on aesthetic practices are framed precisely in this manner, suggesting that others become mere objects in the quest for self-stylization. But it is not only that Foucault’s account appears too ‘egocentric’ or ‘self-concerned’ to be adequately and truly ‘ethical.’ Without establishing the ethical primacy of the other, any sense in which the subject

³⁹⁵ Cordner, “Foucault, Ethical Self-Concern and the Other,” 607.

³⁹⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 43.

³⁹⁷ See Cordner, “Foucault, Ethical Self-Concern and the Other,” 607. Thus Cordner points out that “Even if someone’s concern with (say) self-mastery does require some ‘care for others,’ so far as what guides her care for them is her ‘aiming at’ self-mastery, such care for them is surely very different in spirit – very different *ethically*.” (“Foucault, Ethics and the Other,” 6.)

³⁹⁸ Cordner, “Foucault, Ethics and the Other,” 4-5.

³⁹⁹ See Cordner, “Foucault, Ethics and the Other.”

might be *responsible* for and answerable to that other is undermined.⁴⁰⁰ Barry Smart goes as far as to say that Foucault fails to even *consider* the question of the moral responsibility of the subject.⁴⁰¹ He argues that no attempt is made “to explore the non-reciprocal relationship with the Other which is at the very heart of social life, the ethical significance of which is anterior to relation with the self.”⁴⁰²

Finally, the relations with others implied by *rapport à soi* pose certain problems for the political aspects of Foucault’s project. In Chapter Three I adopted the Deleuzian model of the fold, complemented by Butler’s idea of originary relations to social norms, to explicate the concept of *rapport à soi*. Given the subsequent argument – that relations with others are a constitutive component of *rapport à soi* – there arises the issue of the possible threat that this fold poses to others. This is because in conceiving the reflexive fold in this way, others are posited as mere elements of the outside—as part of what is exterior to me. From a Levinasian perspective, this diminishes and even denies the alterity and difference of other people. For Levinas, the absolute alterity of the Other is distinguished from that which is other merely because it is external to and different to me. David Boothroyd poses this problem in Foucaultian terms when he asks how, given the Deleuzian reading of *rapport à soi* as constituted through the doubling of force relations, “this intensification, or, focus of force, avoids becoming a local force of domination over the Other.”⁴⁰³ This problem is important because it impacts the extent to which Foucault’s late work can be said to promote difference and diversity, which, considering his objections to discipline and normalization, is a significant objective in his later ideas about the activities of self-constitution.

Boothroyd’s response to this problem is to turn to the notion of ‘alimentation.’ This re-institutes the Levinasian distinction between exteriority and what is absolutely Other, which prevents *rapport à soi* from collapsing the other into the fold of the

⁴⁰⁰ Cordner argues that the meaning of ethics should be found “in the authoritative claim of the other upon us. Another human being as immediately claiming me in response – *there* is the source or moment of ethical authority.” (Ibid., 10.) He argues further that it is “*the other* as inviolably precious” that is at the heart of ethics” and further that: “The peremptory and compelling authority of the ethical is the authority of the other as wholly claiming us in inescapable response.” (“Foucault, Ethical Self-Concern and the Other,” 607.)

⁴⁰¹ Barry Smart, “Foucault, Levinas and the Subject of Responsibility,” 83.

⁴⁰² Ibid., 82.

⁴⁰³ David Boothroyd, “Foucault’s Alimentary Philosophy: Care of the self and responsibility for the other,” in *Man and World: an International Philosophical Review* 29, no. 4 (1996), 369.

self.⁴⁰⁴ Rather than thinking about the practices of self-care and self-stylization in ways that see others as mere instruments and means – which are subsequently folded into my *rapport à soi*, thereby reducing them to part of my self-relation – Boothroyd suggests that these practices and the subsequent movement by which *rapport à soi* is established be thought as alimentary.⁴⁰⁵ On one hand, the folding of exteriority can then be thought as ‘sustaining’ or ‘supporting’ the self. (In Chapter Two I argued that Foucault’s characterization of power relations and government contain an implicit commitment to the ‘maintenance’ or ‘sustenance’ of the other as a free subject, and therefore to the practice of liberty as self-relation. This would be to support or hold up the other in their self-relation and practice of liberty, and to ensure this possibility is maintained.) On the other hand, if the alimentary process is weighted more to the side of nourishment, this characterization becomes problematic. As nourishment, alimentation tends toward the *assimilation* and destruction of *alterité* in the self-relation.

By adopting the Levinasian distinction between what is external to me – what is other – and what is absolutely Other, however, this potential problem with an alimentary characterization is circumvented. The danger lies in thinking of the Other merely in terms of their differential relation to me: if the practices of self-care and self-stylization can be shown to form part of the general field of exteriority, which Deleuze’s description of the folding of force relations would seem to allow, the absolute alterity of the Other would not be at risk.⁴⁰⁶ In order to avoid the reduction of the other’s alterity threatened by the fold, the formation of self (the self-relation) must occur within the order of the Same and thus independently of the Other.⁴⁰⁷ Boothroyd’s argument is that the practices and activities of self-care and self-

⁴⁰⁴ He argues that it is by “rethinking selfhood on the basis of the relationship between ‘praxis’ and ‘interiority’ in terms of *alimentation* that a self open to alterity becomes thinkable.” (Ibid., 361.) In this Boothroyd is responding to Terry Eagleton’s claim that Foucault’s emphasis on praxis precludes the possibility of interiority. See Eagleton, “From the *polis* to postmodernism,” in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 395.

⁴⁰⁵ Alimentation, he suggests, serves as “a useful way of thinking of the general movement by which *what is exterior is transformed into interiority*.” (Boothroyd, “Foucault’s Alimentary Philosophy,” 375.)

⁴⁰⁶ As Boothroyd notes: “[It] is precisely such a reflective, theoretical representation of the other person in terms of her/his positioning in the socio-political totality that presents the threat of ethical violence and leads to a reduction of the Other’s alterity to the level of what is merely exterior to the Same.” (Ibid.)

⁴⁰⁷ Thus Boothroyd suggests that: “Levinas’ distinction serves, in his account, to distinguish between relations to others insofar as they figure in and are partly constitutive of my social

stylization occur in a different order than that in which the Other exists. In his view, “The self-fashioning *praxis* of Foucault’s subject takes place in another ontological order to that in which the self figures as part of the social world shared with others.”⁴⁰⁸ That is, as prior to an encounter with the Other. There is no threat to the Other because *rapport à soi* is constituted through the folding of the outside, distinct from absolute alterity. They remain safe in their alterity, independent of the relations through which I constitute myself.⁴⁰⁹ This view thus posits *rapport à soi* as the primary formation of an interiority preceding the encounter with the Other, maintaining the absolute alterity of the Other as the foundation of ethics.⁴¹⁰

This would appear to go some way in defending Foucault’s claim that the care of the self precedes care for others. But this still leaves Foucault open to the charge that by placing care for others as secondary, or at least dependent, on the care of the self, the Other becomes commensurate with the Same, denying the Other any primordial ethical responsibility. For Foucault, however, both aesthetic activities and the practices of care for the self take place within the socio-political reality: they are embedded within the very manner in which we engage with each other on the social, ethical and political levels (which are not distinct anyway). While the reflexive relationship to self is first established through originary relations with others, the practices by which the subject constitutes and forms themselves as an ethical subject take place within the same order in which they exist with others. These are concrete practices situated within a specific social and cultural context and with reference to shared frameworks of meaning. It is on this basis that I can call upon others for assistance in my self-care and upon which others can call for my assistance.

Returning to theme of alterity, Levinas’ work responds to the way in which Western philosophy tends to diminish the absolute alterity of other people.⁴¹¹ That is,

world; my personal projects and life in general, and relations to other people as absolute others to whom I bear, according to Levinas, an infinite ethical obligation.” (Ibid., 376.)

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 373.

⁴⁰⁹ Rather than indicating a form of being, for Boothroyd the ‘aesthetics of existence’ is “an aesthetic subjectivity which is somehow *primary*, or prior to the ontological determination of the *oneself*.” (Ibid., 370.)

⁴¹⁰ Boothroyd argues: “[However] if *care of the self* is thought of as the practical formation of an interiority, an Inside which is not the product of an exterior social and political system, but rather reciprocal and coextensive with the Outside – along the lines of the Deleuzian Inside/Outside fold – then can we not perhaps see in this, the only possible basis for ethics, namely, that the other person is another *oneself* and thus wholly other than me?” (Ibid., 382.)

⁴¹¹ See Colin Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 40. The notion of alterity is fundamental to Levinas’ account of the ethical. He undermines the usual

the habit of understanding and engaging with other people on the basis of the assumption of their commonality with me. Foucault actually shares this concern, although he expresses it in different terms. He calls into question the primacy of the self and subject as the condition of knowledge and the subsequent implication that the subject is the condition of our understanding of and engagement with others. For Levinas the problem is that the Other's absolute alterity is denied because the primacy of the self reduces the Other to the level of the self (the Same). By reinstituting the primacy of the Other as the foundation of ethical interaction, we are able to challenge the egocentric attitude that sees other people "either as extensions of the self, or as alien objects to be manipulated for the advantage of the individual or social self."⁴¹² Of course, this latter view is precisely the charge that is often levelled at Foucault, and from a Levinasian perspective Foucault's emphasis on *rapport à soi* and care for the self (especially in its precedence over care for others) would certainly appear vulnerable to such a charge.

Yet while Foucault does explore ethical relationships with others, he does take a different approach than Levinas. He orientates his investigations in terms of the subject's relationship with herself; it is in terms of this relationship that he analyses relations to other people and conceives of our responsibilities toward them. Nevertheless, it is the case that Foucault does not conceive of an *a priori* ethical commitment to others in the way of Levinas. From this perspective, responsibility and care for others must be based on a commitment to the other that precedes any relation to or care for the self.⁴¹³ The very possibility of care for others (even as following care

opposition between self and other, subject and object, stating that: "If the same would establish its identity by simple *opposition to the other*, it would already be a part of a totality encompassing the same and the other" (Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis [Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969], 38.) To define the self and other by reference to each other would, for Levinas, constitute a totality and therefore diminish the absolute alterity of the Other. To quote Levinas at length: "The metaphysical other is other with an alterity that is not formal, is not the simple reverse of identity, and is not formed out of resistance to the same, but is prior to every initiative, to all imperialism of the same. It is other with an alterity constitutive of the very content of the other. Other with an alterity that does not limit the same, for in limiting the same the other would not be rigorously other: by virtue of the common frontier the other, within the system, would yet be the same. The absolutely other is the Other." (*Ibid.*, 39.)

⁴¹² John Wild, 'Introduction' to *Totality and Infinity*, 12.

⁴¹³ Smart argues that "It is only possible for care for self to encompass care for others if there is from the beginning, if there is *already*, a responsibility for the other. [...] It is from the initial moral bearing of being, taking or assuming responsibility for the other that a particular ethical practice of caring for the self follows." ("Foucault, Levinas and the Subject of Responsibility," 87).

for oneself) might be precluded by the lack of an *a priori* ethical responsibility for others.

Does Foucault's emphasis on *rapport à soi* and the precedence of care for the self necessarily preclude the subject from bearing responsibilities toward others? It is true that Foucault does not have any sense of a primordial responsibility to other human beings that pre-exists our ethical engagement with them. But does this preclude the possibility of responsibility altogether? I offer two points in defence. First, if we recall the claim noted in the previous section, Foucault states that "care for self takes moral precedence *in the measure that the relationship to self takes ontological precedence* [my italics]."⁴¹⁴ What Foucault means is that one's *rapport à soi* takes precedence over care for others. 'Care' is, as we have seen above, an attitude toward oneself, a manner of being, and an activity. Conceived like this, the care for the self *presupposes* a reflexive relationship with oneself. Care is a social practice that takes place within the socio-political domain and within concrete relationships with others. As such, the practices and activities of care assume a prior reflexive relationship with oneself.

Recalling the analysis of *rapport à soi* at the end of Chapter Three, whereby it is through originary relations to others (in Butler's words) and through the fold of force relations (in Deleuze's words), Foucault's emphasis on the precedence of care for oneself might be cast in a different light. While this does not go so far as to posit an originary and primary ethical responsibility for the other in a Levinasian sense, it goes some way in addressing the problem of whether care for oneself *entails* care for others. It is not a matter of demonstrating the link whereby caring for others is entailed by caring for oneself: it is a matter of understanding how Foucault conceives of the inter-relational nature of ethical practices. Care is neither a primordial ethical bearing toward others, nor representative of an *a priori* ethical commitment. Foucault's examples and discussions are of concrete situations and dilemmas and in reference to the different subject-positions of those who must care for themselves. This is not to say that there is *no* genuine ethical spirit to Foucault's ethics, but that this spirit is not derived from a conception of care as recognition of the absolute authority of the Other, nor from a conception of primordial responsibility.

⁴¹⁴ Foucault, "The Ethic of Care," 7.

Second, as I have already suggested above, care for oneself takes priority over care for others because it is the activities and thought in the practice of care for oneself that *enables* care for others. Much of Foucault's analysis of the theme of the care for the self focuses on the way that it is a condition not only for caring for others – Foucault discusses at length the care that Socrates takes for himself in order to care not only for others, such as Alcibiades, but for the city itself – but for accessing the philosophical life and the condition upon which one can speak truth to power. I note in conclusion that the precedence of care for the self is *structural*: it has no bearing on the *spirit* of Foucault's ethics.

If Boothroyd does not miss the point in first defending Foucault from a critique posed in Levinasian terms, he certainly does by positing Foucault as a closet Levinasian. Foucault clearly did not conceive of other human beings or ethics in the way of Levinas. A conception of human beings as absolutely Other is too close to absolute conceptions of self and subject that Foucault clearly rejected. But this is not to say that Foucault does not respect alterity, nor that he sacrifices others at the altar of the self. For Foucault, the very meaning and significance of ethics as the relation of the self to itself is derived from its social situated-ness and from its structural dependence on relations with others. In my view, there is no different ontological order in which the relation to self is constituted. The subject *is* formed through the incorporation of relations with others into *rapport à soi*. There *is* a danger to others in this fold (though not in the Levinasian sense). That is why the exercise of power and the practice of liberty are *problems* for Foucault. The danger lies in the reciprocal effects that the exercise of power has both on me, through the kind of *rapport à soi* that is formed and as a subject of that action, and similarly on others. While external relations are originary and initially give rise to this reflexivity, it is the mode of being formed through my *rapport à soi* that will determine how I practice my liberty, and how I behave in relation to others.

It is through its very embeddedness in social interaction that the care for self is meaningful. To return to the point made by Hofmeyr, it is the structural interdependence of self and other in *rapport à soi* that gives meaning to the idea of care of the self: it “derives its qualification as *ethical* practice [...] from its social situatedness.”⁴¹⁵ But what are the implications for the possibilities of difference and

⁴¹⁵ Hofmeyr, “The *Meta*-physics of Foucault's Ethics,” 119.

diversity? We should here recall Foucault's earlier descriptions of disciplinary power. Discipline individualizes human beings, yet promotes and effects conformity and normalization. In positing individuals as objects of knowledge, disciplinary power organizes, homogenizes and ultimately produces subjects.⁴¹⁶ It not only reduces alterity, but ties individuals to their identity. In contrast, then, Foucault's later account of the self-constituting subject that resists the subjectivising effects of power promotes the reinstitution of alterity and difference. The practices of self-care and self-stylization thus signify the opposite of a homogenizing power; enabling the self-constitution of the subject in relation to others and in relation to the world. As Bernauer and Mahon argue, "His [Foucault's] thought moved toward an ever-expanding embrace of otherness, the condition for any community of moral action."⁴¹⁷ Indeed, we can return here to Deleuze:

And what can we ultimately say about our own contemporary modes and our modern relation to self? *What are our four folds?* ... The struggle for a modern subjectivity passes through a resistance to the two present forms of subjection, the one consisting of individualizing ourselves on the basis of constraints of power, the other of attracting each individual to a known and recognized identity, fixed once and for all. The struggle for subjectivity presents itself, therefore, as the right to difference, variation and metamorphosis.⁴¹⁸

For Foucault, as I argue further below, the struggle for a modern subjectivity (as Deleuze puts it) takes the form of a struggle against the 'epistemological horizon,' to use Butler's phrase. It is to call into question given structures of meaning by which we understand ourselves and others as certain kinds of subjects. The practices that fall under the heading of care for the self for Foucault take a central role in this struggle. This is precisely because they cultivate the 'subjective dimension' and the critical attitude whereby subjects give themselves the right to question authority on its relation to truth. Before returning to this idea in Chapters Five and Six, I turn now to two other lines of enquiry regarding Foucault's account of ethics.

⁴¹⁶ For example, Foucault describes two effects of 'examination' as the constitution of the individual as a describable and analyzable object, capturing and recoding individual aptitudes, and the constitution of a comparative system that enables the measurement of individuals and groups against one another. See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 190.

⁴¹⁷ James W. Bernauer and Michael Mahon, "The Ethics of Michel Foucault," in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, 155.

The problem of universality

I argue in this section that Foucault's description of *rapport à soi* – understood within the context of Foucault's account of power relations – does provide the foundation for a minimalist idea of universality. The presence or otherwise of a form of universality is important because it is purported to be a precondition of a properly ethical attitude toward others.⁴¹⁹ Part of the problem (which is explored further in Chapter Five) is the assumption that Foucault's emphasis on the aesthetic necessarily precludes the possibility of ethical universality.⁴²⁰ After identifying what it is about ethical universality that Foucault finds problematic, I survey Christopher Cordner's idea that a certain 'universality of outlook' might be compatible with Foucault's ethics.

Foucault appears to reject any idea that a meaningful ethics or morality is one that is universal. On the one hand, Foucault was suspicious of purportedly universal principles or concepts to which such a morality inevitably refers, particularly, of course, a conception of human nature. On the other hand, Foucault was suspicious of the operation of universality: particularly its resemblance to the operation of normalization. The subjection of individuals to a 'universal' ethic would, if based on a conception of 'human essence,' inevitably refer back to the power structures that produced it, and subject individuals to the same normalizing effects as disciplinary power. Foucault said in one interview that: "The search for a form of morality that would be acceptable to everyone—in the sense that everyone would have to submit to it—strikes me as catastrophic."⁴²¹ Such a form of morality would be catastrophic

⁴¹⁸ Deleuze, *Foucault*, 105-106.

⁴¹⁹ The important point at hand is that views such as Cordner's presume that ethics must have some element of universality in order to be valid: "there *is* an important form of ethical universality, different from the conception Foucault opposes, that any decent ethics must acknowledge." See Cordner, "Foucault and Ethical Universality," 581. (Whether ethics must have some form of universality in order to be valid is, of course, an entirely different issue and is beyond the scope of the present discussion.) Cordner's view is important because he proposes a form of universalism compatible with Foucault's ethics, but which, he argues, does not have the consequences that Foucault opposes. The important difference between Cordner's appeal to universality and the strong normative standards required by Habermas, Taylor and Fraser, is that Cordner's conception does not involve *a priori* universal norms, nor *a priori* rejection of forms of power.

⁴²⁰ Rainer Rochlitz, for example, observes that "What is nonetheless striking is that Foucault's critical contributions – whether they take the form of writing or political practices – contain a normative content, even a virtually universalist normativity: referring to a requirement for the autonomy of the person and opposition to unjust suffering" ("The Aesthetics of Existence: Post-conventional Morality and the Theory of Power in Foucault," in *Michel Foucault: Philosopher*, ed. T. Armstrong [Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992], 250).

⁴²¹ Foucault, "The Return of Morality," 473.

because it limits individuals to the conception of human essence on which it is based. As Cordner observes, a universal ethics, in Foucault's view, denies human difference: it is based on a historically and culturally situated idea of what human beings are and what they might become, governing individuals within these limits.⁴²² If Foucault cannot entertain an *a priori* conception of human being or essence, then he cannot conceive of ethics as following, in the Humean tradition, from an understanding of the principles according to which human nature operates.

Rather ethics follows from his conception of human beings as subjects of power. If a form of universalism is possible based upon this conception, it might avoid the consequences Foucault objected to. As Butler argues, "the problem is not universality as such but with an operation of universality that fails to be responsive to cultural particularity and fails to undergo a reformulation of itself in response to the social and cultural conditions it includes within its scope of applicability."⁴²³ Based on a historically and culturally-specific conception of human being, such a form of universalism would then be responsive to this particularity. Let us first consider the form of ethical universality presented by Cordner.

Cordner's alternative derives its universality not from norms of behaviour, but from a certain *attitude*: a 'universalism of outlook.'⁴²⁴ That is, a way of thinking about others that he thinks is missing from Foucault's account of ethics. It is a form of universality that is ethically significant not because it is concerned with 'what to do' but with how one *thinks about* and *recognizes* others as ethically significant.⁴²⁵ While Cordner admits that this is compatible with Foucault's account of ethics, he argues that there is nothing in Foucault's account of *rapport à soi* that *excludes* orientations

⁴²² In Cordner's words, "The normalizing forces of disciplinary power shape the conviction that there is a shared human essence, and then operate to confine people in accordance with it. But there is no such essence. The search for a universal ethic is 'catastrophic' just because it seeks to impose an illusory sameness on the important reality of human difference. Foucault thinks that universal ethics is always predicated on an already-given conception of the range of human capacities, so that its application excludes all sorts of humanly important possibilities, including many that have yet to appear." ("Foucault and Ethical Universality," 580-581.)

⁴²³ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 6. She goes on: "When a universal precept cannot, for social reasons, be appropriated or when—indeed, for social reasons—it must be refused, the universal precept itself becomes a site of contest, a theme and an object of democratic debate."

⁴²⁴ Cordner, "Foucault and Ethical Universality," 585.

⁴²⁵ According to Cordner, "ethical universalism is usually conceived [...] as a matter of exceptionless norms of behaviour – of what *actions* are to be done, or forbidden, or permitted. [...] Recognition of this important kind of ethical universalism carries, that is to say, no commitment to 'universal norms of behaviour.' This form of universalism is engaged, instead, at the level of how others are acknowledged." (Ibid., 585).

lacking this universal outlook.⁴²⁶ Before I address this specific claim, let me briefly outline what this outlook, according to Cordner, entails.

This universal outlook, according to Cordner, is a way of thinking of others. It is the acknowledgement that all others share the same ‘ethical status’ as me: an equality derived from the recognition that all human beings share the same range of possibilities in capacity and feeling. As Cordner describes it, “What is at issue in this conception of universality is realizing a kind of equality with others – all others – which depends on seeing them under the *aegis* of certain fundamental possibilities of human meaning.”⁴²⁷ This form of universalism escapes the charge of normalization because the recognition of equality is protected by the underlying acknowledgement of the range of possibilities that Cordner suggests are ‘fundamental’ to ‘human being.’⁴²⁸ This sense of equality, Cordner argues, “is compatible with recognizing an indefinite variety of activities and cultural forms and patterns of behaviour, including many that have yet to appear.”⁴²⁹ This form of universal outlook, moreover, is necessary to the ethically sound acknowledgment of difference that is central to Foucault’s project.⁴³⁰

Cordner holds that although Foucault’s account of *rapport à soi* – and his account of ethics more broadly – does not exclude ethical orientations that fail to recognize the ethical equality of others thus defined, Foucault’s account itself fails to *include* such recognition.⁴³¹ In Chapter Two I pointed to the significance of Foucault’s

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 588.

⁴²⁷ Ibid.

⁴²⁸ Cordner states: “*This* sense of equality does not seek to impose a single set of norms of behaviour on people, or presuppose that human beings have a timelessly fixed range of human capacities.” (Ibid.)

⁴²⁹ Ibid. It appears that this form of universalism is not open to the charge of normalisation because such universality does not dictate norms of behaviour. Yet it seems to assume that the behaviour that will follow from such a universal recognition, protected by the acknowledgement of shared human meaning, will somehow avoid the risks of normalization. That is, it will prevent me from wishing or forcing everyone to behave or be like me.

⁴³⁰ Cordner notes: “Interpreters of Foucault have often supposed that once a universal moral code is rejected, all that is left is the importance of recognizing difference. [...] I am saying, in effect, that difference can be taken seriously only when it is recognized as expressive of a certain kind of human significance, and this depends on its being seen under the *aegis* of those possibilities of human meaning I mentioned. That is to say, a certain universal background – although emphatically not one that seeks to straitjacket people in universal norms of behaviour – is a condition of an ethically robust and respectful acknowledgement of difference.” (Ibid., 589.)

⁴³¹ As we saw earlier, Cordner points as an example to the apparently coincidental link between care for others and care of the self; the point of which appears to be that any care for others is not the result of such a universal ethical outlook, but corollary to the care one takes for oneself.

definition of power relations as conditional upon the recognition and maintenance of the other as a person who acts.⁴³² This provides the starting point for thinking about the presence of a form of universal outlook in Foucault's ethics.

To get at the ethical significance of this recognition, however, we need to think about what Foucault means by 'someone who acts.' This is *prima facie* the 'free subject': someone who has a range of possibilities that gives rise to the potential for action. But it is also someone who has *rapport à soi*: a reflexive relation to self through which an individual understands themselves as a subject, and whereby their actions have meaning in reference to broader frameworks of interpretation. To recognize the other as a person who acts is to recognize them as someone with *rapport à soi*; it is to recognize not only that their actions are founded upon this relation, but that their actions – and my actions upon their actions – *bear upon* this relation. This is close to what Patton calls the 'feeling of power.' Given the reflexive interplay between an individual's *rapport à soi*, their actions, and the actions of others upon them, the capacity to act and how an individual interprets or gives meaning to their actions affects the kind/s of subject/s they feel themselves to be. Thus when Foucault claims that power relations are articulated on the recognition and maintenance of acting others, this recognition is of the other as an ethical subject and as someone who has *rapport à soi*.

Is this the sort of 'acknowledgement' that Cordner requires? While it is not opposed to the form of acknowledgement that he outlines, and indeed while it may meet some criteria, it does not have the kind of 'protection' that Cordner thinks the reference to 'fundamental possibilities' of human meaning provide. Foucault's recognition of the other as an acting subject, however, does go some way in meeting the kind of universalist outlook that Cordner requires. Cordner, for example, describes this as:

seeing another as occupying a certain space of possibilities within which alone he or she can be acknowledged as fully one's fellow human being. To see another in this way involves seeing her, for example, as able to be humiliated in certain sorts of ways, as one whose life is capable of certain sorts of meaning and who is able to

⁴³² See Chapters Two and Three of the current document. Cf. Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 789.

understand her own life as having or lacking such meaning, as someone one could seriously wrong and who could occasion one's serious remorse.⁴³³

If, as I have argued, Foucault's 'recognition' and 'maintenance' of the other includes the recognition of their *rapport à soi*, then this comes very close to such an acknowledgement. Foucault's account clearly acknowledges others as occupying a 'space of possibilities' and this is central to his very understanding of human interaction and freedom, although Foucault's objections to humanism might preclude us from describing this acknowledgement in terms of 'human being.' Building on Patton's idea of the 'feeling of power' discussed in Chapter Three, *rapport à soi* provides the conceptual framework for how we might think about the capacity to feel humiliation, or the capacity for self-understanding for example, internal to Foucault's account. As I argue broadly in the remainder of the thesis, Foucault's accounts of *rapport à soi* and care of the self *do* provide possible "ways of thinking our common humanity,"⁴³⁴ as Cordner puts it. Foucault's acknowledgement consists in the recognition of others as subjects of power, as free subjects, and as subjects whose *rapport à soi* and care of the self is predicated on this freedom and power.

The specificity of subject-positions: a normative possibility?

In this section I argue that, following the minimalist form of universalism outlined above, the idea of subject-positions outlined in Chapter Three can be usefully employed to demonstrate that a kind of situational and social norm is necessary to and consistent with Foucault's broader ethical project. To do this, I outline how *rapport à soi* is only coherent if interpreted within a broader 'framework of recognition,' to borrow Butler's phrase, that gives meaning to the kinds of subject at which I aim (*telos*) and the practices through which I achieve this aim (*ascetics*). Second, I suggest that despite Foucault's concerted efforts to move away from ethical universality, the coherence of his overall account rests in part on the relationship with the subject-position/s from which an individual derives some of their norms and principles for behaviour. These do not, however, result in a command morality or the kind of universalism that Foucault rejected. Rather, I draw upon Foucault's idea of 'ethical distance,' which describes the way in which individuals form a relation to the subject-

⁴³³ Cordner, "Foucault and Ethical Universality," 592.

position they occupy, in order to re-think how situational norms might be compatible with *rapport à soi*.

By way of background, let me note the following observation regarding the apparent opposition of aesthetics to other ethical formations. Take, for example, the following statement by Foucault: “[And] if I have taken an interest in Antiquity, it is 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. To this absence of a morality, one responds, or must respond, with an investigation which is that of an aesthetics of existence.”⁴³⁵ Critics of Foucault have tended to the view that an aesthetic ethics is mutually exclusive of other ethical forms; most notably ethical universalism outlined above and the kind of strong *a priori* normativity propounded by Habermas et. al. Cordner’s analysis, for example, implicitly presumes that Foucault posits ‘specificity’ in opposition to ‘universality,’ thus denying the possibility that Foucault might recognize ethical obligations as both unique or situation-specific *and* universalisable. Cordner’s take is that the emphasis on aesthetics is necessarily at odds with the possibility of universality. In taking this view critics have assumed that Foucault presents aesthetic ethics not only as the sole alternative to, but as *incompatible* with other forms. That is, that ethics so conceived must naturally exclude other ethical possibilities. Thus one of the aims of this section is to demonstrate how a particular conception of situationally-specific norms is compatible with the aesthetic aspects of Foucault’s ethics.

Foucault’s concept of *rapport à soi* is only coherent if read as part of a broader ethical framework that includes some reference to a grid of intelligibility, which gives it scope, context and meaning. It is through this grid that the operation of social norms comes to bear upon *rapport à soi*. Foucault understands the domain of ethics to include the relations one has with others, and with the world, in addition to the relationship with oneself. As Bennett describes it,

Ethics is for Foucault a matter of reflective heteronomy, of the recognition of one’s implication in and dependence upon a web of social relations within which there nevertheless remains room for the

⁴³⁴ Ibid., 593.

⁴³⁵ Foucault, “An Aesthetics of Existence,” 451.

individual to carve out a space of distinction, self-direction, or ‘liberty.’⁴³⁶

This reflective heteronomy is captured in the four elements of *rapport à soi*, each in their own way referring to the social framework in which the relation to self is established. Building on the account of *rapport à soi* provided in Chapter Three, in which originary relations with others give rise to the reflexive relation to self, in this section I suggest that by understanding how the activities and aims of *rapport à soi* are embedded within the social sphere and rely upon common frameworks of interpretation, it becomes clear that some form of situational norms are necessary to the internal coherence of Foucault’s account.

In his characterisation of *rapport à soi*, Foucault is attempting to describe the ways in which how we think about ourselves as certain kinds of people, as holding certain beliefs and values, and as belonging to a social group all have very real, constitutive effects on our subjectivity. It is an attempt to describe the reflexive aspect of ourselves through which we form ourselves as certain kinds of people in relation to others and in relation to the world. Foucault does not reject, moreover, the influence of prescriptive codes on individuals. Rather, the moral code forms an *element* of individual ethics, rather than its entirety. What Foucault refers to as the moral code acts as the poles of reference against which subjects are formed, or form themselves, and determine the modes of subjectivity that are legitimate or meaningful within a certain historical-social context. This is what Butler calls the ‘framework for recognition’; that is, the framework in relation to which subjects recognize and understand themselves, and in relation to which subjects might challenge and transform the norms underlying this framework.⁴³⁷ An individual’s *rapport à soi* is necessarily linked to the social norms that form part of this framework and which are associated, in part, with the subject-positions defined within a network of relations. Self-recognition – or what could be explained as the various kinds of subject that I might recognize or desire myself to be – is delimited by the social norms and context in which my self-constitution is carried out.

⁴³⁶ Jane Bennett, “‘How is It, Then, That We Still Remain Barbarians?’: Foucault, Schiller, and the Aestheticization of Ethics,” in *Political Theory* 24, no. 4 (November 1996), 662.

⁴³⁷ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 22.

It is clear that the way Foucault imagines an individual as both recognizing and subjecting themselves to a particular goal, principle, or precept refers to the social and cultural context in which they live; such values – Foucault cites fidelity as an example – are only meaningful within a common sphere of interpretation. Foucault's idea of the ethical *telos* is similarly embedded within its social and cultural context. The other folds of *rapport à soi* – the identification of the ethical substance, the mode of subjection and ethical work – through which a particular mode of being emerges are all social practices, carried out in relation to other people and referring to shared values.

It is in terms of the ascetic practices of *rapport à soi* – ethical work – that Foucault is most explicit about this point. The activities or *ascesis* associated with *rapport à soi* are social practices; they take place within a specific social context, build upon or require new relationships with others, and they work towards an ideal form of subjectivity (*telos*) that has been formed within a web of relations and in reference to common frameworks of interpretation. For example,

[T]hese practices [by which the subject constitutes herself in an active fashion] are nevertheless not something that the individual invents by himself. They are patterns that he finds in his culture and which are proposed, suggested and imposed on him by his culture, his society and his social group.⁴³⁸

Foucault is clear that far from being isolated and independent, the aesthetic practices of an individual's *rapport à soi* reflect and are embedded within broader social practices. In the modern context we can look to exercise regimes and dieting practices as examples of ascetic practices derived from particular social groups and discourses. Patterns or models for practices might also be derived from the kinds of subject-positions (roles) that an individual occupies – for example, their profession, role as a parent, as a student – with which certain standards of behaviour and practices are associated.⁴³⁹

⁴³⁸ Foucault, "The Ethic of Care for the Self," in *The Final Foucault*, 11.

⁴³⁹ But as this passage makes clear, it is not the case that such practices are always voluntarily sought, nor that such 'self-forming' practices enable complete autonomy over this activity. Indeed, one of the risks is that the imposition, or even the voluntary assumption, of some models will contribute to the normalization of individuals. For Foucault, normative frameworks of behaviour are conceptually bound with 'power.' See, for example, *The Government of Oneself and Others*, 3. Foucault characterizes 'normative frameworks of

What I am trying to get at here, specifically, is whether *rapport à soi* – and the conception of aesthetics more broadly – thus conceived might be compatible with a certain kind of situational-norm: that is, norms or principles for behaviour that are associated with specific, if not unique, situations. One way to approach this possibility is through the idea of subject-positions, as outlined in Chapter Three. They are the positions delimited by the convergence of relations of power, and articulated by associated discursive practices, in which the self-constituting activity of subjectivity occurs. These subject-positions might be usefully thought of in terms of socially or institutionally defined roles—positions which, delimited by the network of relations of which they form an axis, have a set of associated rights and duties organized around an institutionally or socially specified function.⁴⁴⁰ These rights and duties might be thought of as ‘role obligations’: “the sort of obligations we have (or take ourselves to have) as occupants of social roles: as citizens, family members, teachers and so forth.”⁴⁴¹ Clearly Foucault would find the idea of ‘role obligations’ thus defined problematic for all sorts of reasons, not least because of the conceptual reliance on ‘institutionally defined’ roles, and the assumption that the moral requirements of a particular role would be the same in all instances. I do not wish to push this point too far, suffice to say that Foucault *does* assume that different roles or functions in society carry with them particular responsibilities and obligations. For example, in Foucault’s analysis of Isocrates it is because Nicocles recognizes himself *as* the King – and therefore in a position of power – that he recognizes the imperative of moderation.⁴⁴² Cordner rightly points out that any king would recognize the same obligations; that the duties and obligations acknowledged as part of being *this* king could equally be acknowledged as entailed by *any* king.⁴⁴³

behaviour for individuals’ as the concrete object of investigation for the axes of power. This is discussed further in Chapter Five.

⁴⁴⁰ In this characterisation I draw upon Michael O. Hardimon’s paper “Role Obligations,” in *The Journal of Philosophy* VI XCI, no. 7, (July 1994), which Cordner uses to define and contextualise ‘role obligations.’ Hardimon defines ‘role’ as referring to “constellations of institutionally specified rights and duties organized around an institutionally specified social function” (334).

⁴⁴¹ Hardimon, “Role Obligations,” 333. Hardimon provides the following detailed definition of role obligations: “a ‘role obligation’ is a moral requirement, which attaches to an institutional role, whose content is fixed by the function of the role, and whose normative force flows from the role. To say that a role obligation ‘attaches to an institutional role’ is to say that it applies to an individual in her capacity as an occupant of that role: as a sister, as a citizen, or as a bus driver, for example.” (334-335)

⁴⁴² See Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” 264-265.

⁴⁴³ Cordner, 582.

The problem, however, is the extent to which Foucault thinks that such duties and obligations are binding. I have already outlined how *rapport à soi* interacts with such subject-positions (I will continue to use ‘subject-position’ to distinguish Foucault’s take on this idea from the stronger sense of ‘role obligation’ outlined above). As is the case with Nicocles, Foucault’s analyses do tend toward the acknowledgement that subject-positions entail certain duties and obligations, but this is clearly not the whole story. In Foucault’s analysis, Nicocles’ recognition of his responsibilities refers not only to his position as king, but to his *rapport à soi*. For Cordner, this is indicative of Foucault’s emphasis on an ‘aesthetics of existence’ as the sole, or at least primary, reason for Nicocles conducting himself in this way. What I am suggesting, however, is that subject-positions *do* entail situational norms for behaviour, but in a way that is compatible with Foucault’s emphasis on the role of *rapport à soi*.

To get at what this might mean, let us turn for a moment to Foucault’s idea of ‘ethical distance’ that he employs in his analysis of ancient Roman and Hellenistic philosophy. Here the care of the self puts one at a state of removal from the activities and functions one performs in social and political life. This removal – what Foucault calls ‘ethical distance’ – is the space of contemplation that is opened up by the activity of care between one’s *rapport à soi* and the roles and functions associated with one’s relationships with others. It is not to turn away from active social or political life, but to seek in *rapport à soi* the rationality and guidance for how to behave and to conduct oneself *as* an inhabitant of the world and a social citizen.⁴⁴⁴ Foucault writes:

The relationship to self does not detach the individual from any form of activity in the realm of the city-state, the family or friendship; it opens up, rather, as Seneca said, an intervallum between those activities he exercises and what constitutes him as the subject of these activities; this ‘ethical distance’ is what enables him not to feel deprived of what will be taken from him by circumstances; it is what enables him to do no more than what is contained in the definition of the function.⁴⁴⁵

⁴⁴⁴ See the passage from Foucault’s unpublished dossier “Government of the self and others” quoted in Gros, “Course Context,” in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, pages 539-541.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 540.

In this way, Foucault conceives of a certain way of relating the social roles (with their associated functions, rights and responsibilities) one occupies back to *rapport à soi* in order to mediate one's response. That is, rather than defining one's mode of being (and *rapport à soi*) in response to the roles and responsibilities one has, one first establishes a relationship with oneself that forms the base of one's response to those roles. Ethical distance involves:

not trying to establish what you are on the basis of the system of rights and obligations which differentiate and situate you with regard to others, but rather questioning yourself about what you are in order to infer from this what it is fitting to do, either in general or in this or that circumstance, but ultimately according to the functions that you have to exercise.⁴⁴⁶

What Foucault is getting at is the danger inherent in the subject's identifying themselves too closely with their role, occupation or position of power. By focusing on the relationship with oneself, the subject 'removes' herself from that position, which enables the space to reflect upon her thought and behaviour and to form herself as "an ethical subject in the entire sphere of social, political, and civic activities."⁴⁴⁷

Foucault is also invoking the idea outlined earlier in this chapter about the way that the incorporation of principles and rationalities into the subject's mode of being shapes their behaviour and response to future situations. It is really an account of how the individual should constitute themselves in relation to the world. But it also suggests the way in which Foucault's account of *rapport à soi*, and ethics more broadly, is compatible with social norms. The significance of this idea of ethical distance is that it allows Foucault to articulate the way that the subject can have a measured and reflective response to these norms not founded in a command-obedience model of ethics. Foucault wants to distinguish between an unthinking exercise of pre-determined social roles and reasoned and reflective execution of these roles as part of one's *rapport à soi*.

But Foucault also links the ideas of *rapport à soi* and ethical distance with the idea of a critical reflection upon one's behaviour and actions specifically as they pertain to exercises of power and positions of authority. The relationship to self,

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., 539-540.

⁴⁴⁷ Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 94.

according to Foucault, “becomes the foundation of an ethos, which is not the alternative choice to political and civic activity; it offers rather the possibility of defining oneself outside of one’s function, role and prerogatives, and thereby of being able to exercise these in an adequate and rational way.”⁴⁴⁸ Of course, this follows from Foucault’s idea that *rapport à soi* cultivated through the care and government of oneself is a condition of the care and government of others. But if we take a step back for a moment, there is a broader point to be made. That is, *rapport à soi* and practices of the self do two inter-related things. First, they constitute a mode of response to relations and exercises of power. As McGushin points out, Foucault “conceptualises ancient philosophy in terms of practices of ethical subjectivization developed in order to respond to the intensification of relations of power and knowledge.”⁴⁴⁹ Second, they constitute a mode of response to the recognition of the fact that subjects also exercise power over others. As such, Foucault’s analyses and adoption of the relationship with oneself is a response to the question of how we are to constitute ourselves and behave in relation to others, given the recognition of ourselves as powerful subjects. This is precisely why, as we see further in the next chapter, Foucault conceives of aesthetic practices of self-stylisation as *political* practices. He argues for example that the care for the self, rather than signifying a turning-away from active, public life “is much more concerned to define the principle of a relation to self that will make it possible to set the forms and conditions in which political action, participation in the offices of power, the exercise of a function, will be possible or not possible, acceptable or necessary.”⁴⁵⁰

It can be seen that while the coherence of Foucault’s ethics does rest on the interplay of *rapport à soi* with a conception of social norms, Foucault accounts for how these norms – or the duties and obligations associated with a subject-position – might be mediated through a space of reflection opened up through the relation to self. Foucault’s ethics, then, operates at two levels: first, at the level of *rapport à soi*. This is founded in the originary relation to others that gives rise to the reflexivity of *rapport à soi*, as outlined earlier. This initial ethical response includes the recognition of the other as a subject of power and ethics. Second, the operation of ethics at the level of

⁴⁴⁸ Foucault, unpublished dossier “Government of the self and others,” quoted in “Course Context,” in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 549n53.

⁴⁴⁹ McGushin, *Foucault’s Askēsis*, 15. He states further: “What is at stake in Foucault’s analysis of Plato is the way that relations of power and knowledge implicate, play upon, depend upon, or preclude particular relations of oneself to oneself.” (Ibid., 30.)

social interaction and relations of power, and the level at which an individual responds to the duties or obligations they recognize as entailed by a certain subject-position. This recognition is mediated, through Foucault's idea of ethical distance, by *rapport à soi*. Foucault clearly does not think that individuals should form an individualistic and egoistic 'ethics' with disregard or indifference to those others with whom we share our lives. As such, aesthetics should be conceived as forming a creative and original response – and at a certain remove from – to the subject-positions that we occupy.

Conclusion

Foucault is often read as entirely averse to normative structures of any kind, even though he often uses terms and phrases with normative content. For Habermas et. al. this appears inconsistent with his rejection of normative frameworks of critical evaluation. Yet, as we have seen, a certain interpretation of situational norms is consistent with his ethical objectives. Indeed, Foucault's emphasis on the social nature and embeddedness of *rapport à soi* in relations of power and social practices is only coherent if their dependence on social norms and shared frameworks of interpretation are recognised. Self-recognition – or what could be explained as the various kinds of subject that I might recognize or desire myself to be – is delimited by the social norms and context in which my self-constitution is carried out. In this way, Foucault does not want to entirely disassociate ethics from normative or command-obedience models. What he does want to do is re-institute a reflective and thoughtful foundation to how individuals respond to such norms, commands, and rules. As such, *rapport à soi* is compatible with a certain kind of situational-norm: that is, norms and rules for behaviour that are associated with specific, if not unique, situations.

Foucault *does* think that different roles or functions in society carry with them particular responsibilities and obligations. However, the individual's response to these norms of behaviour is mediated by the ethical distance enabled by *rapport à soi*. In this way, a balance is struck between the subject's obligation to respond to their social roles, responsibilities and obligations according to the subject-position/s that they occupy, and the prevention of un-reflective obedience to a set of rules and commands. These do not, however, result in a command morality or the kind of universalism that

⁴⁵⁰ Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 86.

Foucault rejected. Foucault's idea of 'ethical distance' read in conjunction with *rapport à soi* enables social norms to feature as part of Foucault's broader ideas about the relationship between ethics, power and the social. The relationship with oneself enables a reflective and thoughtful response to one's role and obligations.

As we have seen, Foucault wants to avoid an account of ethics that imposes further restrictions and limitations on subjects' self-understanding and modes of being. In this way, the adoption of a form of universalism that avoids these consequences may be compatible with Foucault's philosophical and political commitments. Part of the problem, as Butler points out, is that ethical universalism usually conceived is unresponsive to cultural and social particularity. For some scholars, Foucault goes too far in the opposite direction; adopting an account of ethics that is so specific and particular to the individual that it fails to qualify as an ethics at all. His emphasis on aesthetic practices, moreover, appears to only emphasise its individualistic nature. As I noted above, some interpretations of this aesthetic aspect see it as precluding other ethical models, most notably universalism.

The minimalist form of universalism (what Cordner refers to as a 'universalism of outlook') is found in the recognition that other people are subjects of and subject to power in a similar way to me. Foucault's accounts of *rapport à soi* and care of the self *do* provide possible 'ways of thinking our common humanity.' This involves the recognition of the reflexive nature of human actions, which are both founded on and bear upon *rapport à soi*. It also involves the recognition of these actions as dependent upon a social framework of interpretation through which they are meaningful. What is particularly significant is that for Foucault this recognition of other people as both subject to power *and* capable of self-constitution is a condition of relations of power. In Chapter Six I push this point further in describing a relational conception of politics. In this way, we are able not only to identify a minimalist form of universalist recognition of others as subjects of power, but to extend this to a basic conception of 'relational right.'

Chapter Five: Ethics, aesthetics, politics

Introduction

This chapter focuses on what Foucault offers modern audiences. This represents, in a way, the culmination of Foucault's critical and genealogical work into a groundwork for a politics of ourselves. In considering the motivation for Foucault's turn to ancient practices of the self, I draw out what he thinks the latter offers in terms of both founding and elaborating this new politics. Of particular concern here is the role that aesthetic practices of self-stylisation play in this politics and in relation to Foucault's reformulation of political power.

In section one, I outline Foucault's return to Antiquity and the search for a renewed ethic of the self. In Foucault's view, modernity and Antiquity share a common problem: the practice of liberty. Broadly speaking this is the way in which subjects act, behave and conduct themselves, given the fact of their 'freedom.' It is in approaching this problem that Foucault thinks that ancient ethics might be useful; that in the modern decline of traditional moral foundations Antiquity could offer a means of grounding this liberty in an ethic of the self. Yet Foucault does not seek to re-discover and re-institute ancient values into modernity; rather, ancient ethics represents a point of departure for a new politics of ourselves. Indeed, this follows the archaeo-genealogical recognition that our current modes of self-understanding are contingent upon the structures of power/knowledge specific to our own time. Ancient practices of the self, for Foucault, represent the starting point for re-conceiving political activity and the relationship of self-constitution to politics.

In section two, I examine some of Foucault's comments about his own role as an intellectual and philosopher, suggesting that these reflect – and indeed offer an insight into – certain ideas that Foucault thought we could adopt from the ancient world. On the one hand, he ties his own philosophical practice or 'work' to the aesthetic themes he finds in Antiquity, namely, the transformative and creative aspects of exercises of the self. On the other hand, Foucault sees that work as bearing a certain ethical-political function and responsibility in broader society. That is, Foucault suggests that in addition to cultivating their own critical capacity, intellectuals bear a

responsibility to help others question and challenge their own thought. The significance of this I argue is that Foucault therefore sees public intellectuals and philosophers as bearing a responsibility to help others cultivate their right to question authority on its relation to truth. Indeed, Foucault views *himself* as bearing such a responsibility.

In turning in section three to the aesthetic aspects of Foucault's ethics, I examine the ethical and political implications of aesthetic practices of self-stylisation. First, I point out the problems with the artistic analogy, suggesting that limiting the interpretation of aesthetic practices to the pursuit of a 'beautiful life' is misleading in terms of Foucault's ethical and political objectives. Particularly, I suggest that over-emphasising the Nietzschean element of these aesthetic practices misconstrues the objectives and consequences of Foucault's account. In the fourth section I examine particularly the role of aesthetic practices in Foucault's idea of politics. For some scholars, aesthetic practices are devoid of political relevance because of their apparent restriction to the private sphere. I argue, however, that Foucault restores to aesthetic activities a concern with the *polis* – as practices that, while they may appear to be carried out 'in private' nevertheless have political effects. In doing so, I call into question the relegation of aesthetic practices to the status of 'private' activities.

Finally, in section five I turn to Foucault's discussion of dietetics, which is one example of the ancient practices of self that he suggests we adopt from Antiquity. In doing so, I consider some of the problems with this general idea, particularly in terms of their coherence with Foucault's descriptions of disciplinary power. Further to this, I turn briefly to a particular critical perspective on Foucault's thought from feminist philosophers, in order to assess the vulnerability of such practices to prevailing mechanisms of normalisation.

Returning to Antiquity: possibilities for a modern ethic

Foucault returns to Antiquity in order to adopt and adapt certain ethical ideas in response to the problem of how to give depth and meaning to a modern ethic of the self. It is a 'return' to Antiquity because ancient ethics provides a possible mode of response to a modern problem that nonetheless has its origins in Antiquity. In Foucault's words: "To try to rethink the Greeks today consists not in valorizing Greek morality as the domain of morality par excellence which one would need for self-

reflection, but in seeing to it that European thought can get started again on Greek thought as an experience given once and in regard to which one can be totally free.”⁴⁵¹ Although Foucault turns back to ancient ethics in response to the problems of modern ethics and politics, it nonetheless signals a movement toward something new: a new politics of ourselves, in which the foundation of political engagement lies in the relationship with oneself.

For Foucault, the problem of developing a modern ethic of the self arises initially in response to the recognition that past ways of understanding ourselves and subsequent modes of being are not necessary. From the archaeo-genealogical revelation of conceptions of the self as correlative to historical technologies emerges the ethical and political imperative to overcome or change those technologies. It is not enough to recognise these conceptions as a form of limitation on what we might otherwise be, or how we might otherwise understand ourselves. This recognition is only the first step in establishing practices that will allow new forms of subjectivity to become possible. As Foucault suggests, “Maybe the problem is to change those technologies. And in this case, one of the main political problems would be nowadays, in the strict sense of the word, the politics of ourselves.”⁴⁵² It is thus clear that for Foucault founding an ethic of the self is a political project. A modern ethic of the self, Foucault argues, is necessary and ‘politically indispensable’:

And in this series of undertakings to reconstitute an ethic of the self, in this series of more or less blocked and ossified efforts, and in the movement we now make to refer ourselves constantly to this ethic of the self without ever giving it any content, I think we may have to suspect that we find it impossible today to constitute an ethic of the self, even though it may be an urgent, fundamental, and politically indispensable task, if it is true after all that there is no first or final point of resistance to political power other than in the relationship one has to oneself.⁴⁵³

As McGushin points out, the formation of an ethic of the self is an urgent political task because existing cultures of the self are already imbued with relations and techniques

⁴⁵¹ Foucault, “An Aesthetics of Existence,” 469-470.

⁴⁵² Foucault, “About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self,” 222.

⁴⁵³ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 251-252.

of power.⁴⁵⁴ Foucault is responding in part to the failure of previous attempts at defining an ethic of the self to sufficiently address themselves to power. That is, attempts like those represented by Heidegger's notion of 'authenticity' and Nietzsche's aestheticism are insufficiently concerned with the production of the subject. As I detail further below, this is partly because practices of the self conceived in aesthetic terms are considered devoid of political significance. In Foucault's view, modern attempts to found a culture or ethic of the self have failed on several levels: not only in their lack of political context, but in the lack of meaning and content provided to discourses about the self. The idea of a culture of the self, moreover, has become undermined by perceptions of egoism and narcissism. Foucault points to such phrases as 'being oneself' and 'freeing oneself' as examples of ethical ideals lacking any real meaning.⁴⁵⁵ Although the 'relationship to oneself' may be the 'point of resistance' to power, it remains to be constituted as an *ethic*.

Coinciding with the problem of an empty culture of the self, for Foucault, is the absence of a meaningful ethical foundation left by both waning interest in religion and resistance to state and legal intervention in private life. Foucault thus draws a parallel between his contemporary situation and ancient Greek ethics, which he characterizes as concerned more with constituting ethics as an aesthetics of existence than as involved with religious problems or with social and legal systems.⁴⁵⁶ Foucault notes, for example, that the intensification of individual sexual ethics in the first and second centuries responded to the waning influence of social and political frameworks in which individuals lived.⁴⁵⁷ Foucault questions:

Well, I wonder if our problem nowadays is not, in a way, similar to this one, since most of us no longer believe that ethics is founded in religion, nor do we want a legal system to intervene in our moral, personal, private life. Recent liberation movements suffer from the fact that they cannot find any principle on which to base the

⁴⁵⁴ McGushin, *Foucault's Askēsis*, xvii.

⁴⁵⁵ Foucault states: "when today we see the meaning, or rather the almost total absence of meaning, given to some nonetheless very familiar expressions which continue to permeate our discourse—like getting back to oneself, freeing oneself, being oneself, being authentic, etcetera—when we see the absence of meaning and thought in all of these expressions we employ today, then I do not think we have anything to be proud of in our current efforts to reconstitute an ethic of the self." (*The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 251.)

⁴⁵⁶ Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 255.

⁴⁵⁷ Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 41.

elaboration of a new ethics. They need an ethics, but they cannot find any other ethics than an ethics founded on so-called scientific knowledge of what the self is, what desire is, what the unconscious is, and so on.⁴⁵⁸

Obviously Foucault rejects scientific and psychoanalytic discourses about the self as bases for ethics, partly because an ethics based on science risks becoming a mode of normalization. As Jon Simons observes, the modern mode of subjection founded on a science-based ethics “conflates moral standards with scientific norms, so that our ethics are defined by scientific truth.”⁴⁵⁹ If science involves a particular interplay of power-knowledge, such an ethics would perpetuate this arrangement, folding it into the very formation of subjects. But Foucault also thinks that we need to move away from – and are already moving away from – the conception that ‘morality’ or ‘ethics’ ultimately involves obedience to a set of rules.⁴⁶⁰ Thus Foucault returns to Antiquity in the search for a renewed ethic of the self, and more importantly, for a different ‘model’ of what a contemporary ethic might be. That is, for an ethic centred on individual ethical development, sensitive to the situational and inter-relational nature of subject-formation. Foucault thus considers his own analyses as groundwork, or perhaps preparatory work, re-presenting ancient techniques and practices of the self to a modern audience.

But, as already suggested above, Foucault’s analyses of the theme of care of the self in Antiquity, supported by an account of *rapport à soi*, do not constitute an ‘answer’ to a modern problem.⁴⁶¹ Despite his rejection of the characterization of his own work as looking for an ‘answer,’ Foucault obviously thought that ancient philosophy has something meaningful and useful to offer modernity. Foucault’s friend Paul Veyne observes that “Foucault’s affinity with ancient morality is reduced to the modern reappearance of a single card in a completely new hand: the card of the self working on the self, an aestheticization of the subject, in two very different moralities

⁴⁵⁸ Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” 255-256.

⁴⁵⁹ Jon Simons, *Foucault and the Political*, 46.

⁴⁶⁰ Foucault, “An Aesthetics of Existence,” 451.

⁴⁶¹ In response to a question about whether Greek ethics therefore presents a viable and desirable alternative, Foucault asserts “No! I am not looking for an alternative; you can’t find the solution of a problem in the solution of another problem raised at another moment by other people.” (“On the Genealogy of Ethics,” 256.)

and two very different societies.”⁴⁶² Deleuze also makes the point that the return to Antiquity constitutes a search for a solution to a modern problem. It is not the case that Foucault returned to the Greeks because the interiority of the fold disappeared under the ‘unfolding’ effects of power and knowledge.⁴⁶³ That is, it is not because modern technologies of power preclude a relationship with oneself. Deleuze goes on:

What must be stated, then, is that subjectivation, the relation to oneself, continues to create itself, but by transforming itself and changing its nature to the point where the Greek mode is a distant memory. Recuperated by power-relations and relations of knowledge, the relation to oneself is continually reborn, elsewhere and otherwise.⁴⁶⁴

Foucault looks to Antiquity for a *model* of how we might go about establishing new relationships with ourselves. He proposes certain ideas about how individuals might elaborate their own ethics – founded on the concepts of *rapport à soi* and care of the self – but only insofar as he offers his own observations and ideas upon which individuals might choose to model their own ethics. Paul Veyne suggests that it is Foucault’s description of an aesthetics of the self that would have the most resonance with modern individuals: “the self, taking itself as a work to be accomplished, could sustain an ethics that is no longer supported by either tradition or reason; as an artist of itself, the self would enjoy that autonomy that modernity can no longer do without.”⁴⁶⁵ But aesthetics, like ancient ethics more generally, is not a ready-formulated model: it requires reflection and adaptation.

What would it mean to adopt, reflect upon and then adapt ancient ideas of ethics for the present age? Foucault begins with a contemporary question: “I set out from a problem expressed in the terms current today and I try to work out its genealogy. Genealogy means that I begin my analysis from a question posed in the present.”⁴⁶⁶ For Foucault this concerns how we are to behave and how we are to live, given not

⁴⁶² Paul Veyne, “The Final Foucault and His Ethics,” trans. Catherine Porter and Arnold I. Davidson, *Critical Enquiry* 20, no. 1 (Autumn 1993), 1.

⁴⁶³ See Deleuze, *Foucault*, 103. He goes on: “There will always be a relation to oneself which resist codes and power; the relation to oneself is even one of the origins of these points of resistance.”

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁴⁶⁵ Veyne, “The Final Foucault and His Ethics,” 7.

only the contemporary waning of moral codes and prohibitions, but in response to the political imperative of resistance in the relation to oneself: “the problem of an ethics as a form to be given to one’s behaviour and life has arisen once more.”⁴⁶⁷

For Foucault it is a matter of identifying both the similarities and the differences between ancient and modern morality. His approach to ancient texts is “to examine both the difference that keeps us at a remove from a way of thinking in which we recognize the origin of our own, and the proximity that remains in spite of that distance which we never cease to explore.”⁴⁶⁸ In response to a question about the differences between modern and ancient practices of the self, Foucault responds:

From a strictly philosophical point of view, the morality of Greek Antiquity and contemporary morality have nothing in common. On the other hand, if you take them for what they prescribe, intimate and advise, they are extraordinarily close. It’s the proximity and the difference that we must bring to light and, through their interplay, we must show how the same advice given by the ancient morality can work differently in the style of contemporary morality.⁴⁶⁹

Perhaps this is the task for Foucault’s readers: to take the reformulations that Foucault offers us and think through how they might apply to our own life. There are studies that have begun this task, applying Foucault’s analyses of ancient ethics in the fields of sport studies and feminist philosophy, to name a few.⁴⁷⁰

Even Pierre Hadot, who ultimately criticizes Foucault’s representation of the function of ancient spiritual exercises, acknowledges the possibility of adopting certain practices for use in modernity.⁴⁷¹ He suggests that it is possible to abstract certain ideas or themes from their historical context:

⁴⁶⁶ Foucault, “The Concern for Truth,” 262. As Frédéric Gros notes, Foucault did not intend his work on Hellenistic and Roman philosophy to be a history, but a genealogy. See Frédéric Gros, “Course Context,” in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 521.

⁴⁶⁷ Foucault, “The Concern for Truth,” 263.

⁴⁶⁸ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 7n.

⁴⁶⁹ Foucault, “An Aesthetics of Existence,” 468.

⁴⁷⁰ See, for example, Pirkko Markula-Denison and Richard Pringle, *Foucault, Sport and Exercise: Power, Knowledge and Transforming the Self* (New York: Routledge, 2006); McWhorter, *Bodies and Pleasures*; and Heyes, *Self-Transformations*. (In Chapter Five, I discuss Cressida Heyes’ analysis of modern dieting practices in terms of the ancient art of dietetics, which Foucault writes about in *The Use of Pleasure*.)

⁴⁷¹ Hadot’s view is that in representing ‘spiritual exercises’ as ‘techniques of the self’ Foucault not only over emphasizes the self, but misrepresents the aim of spiritual exercises: to ‘return’ to

Personally, I believe firmly – albeit perhaps naively – that it is possible for modern man to live, not as a sage (*sophos*) – most of the ancients did not hold this to be possible – but as a practitioner of the ever-fragile *exercise* of wisdom...I think modern man can practice the spiritual exercises of Antiquity, at the same time separating them from the philosophical or mythic discourse which came along with them.⁴⁷²

As already suggested, Foucault not only investigates ancient ideas about ethics and the care of the self, but adopts these ideas as themes for his own philosophical work. He attempts to abstract these ideas or principles from their specific historical and philosophical context in order to use them as a foundation from which to extrapolate a ‘new’ ethics. Hadot acknowledges this point: “His description of the practices of the self – like, moreover, my description of spiritual exercises – is not merely an historical study, but rather a tacit attempt to offer contemporary mankind a model for life, which Foucault calls an ‘aesthetics of existence.’”⁴⁷³

Foucault’s ethics – taking this in its broad sense, including the genealogy of subjects, investigations into techniques of the self, *rapport à soi* and the care of the self – is not prescriptive.⁴⁷⁴ Foucault was not a moralizer. Paul Veyne notes that Foucault never sought to justify his own opinions or impose them upon others, emphasizing that his stances – and the actions that flowed from these – were personal choices.⁴⁷⁵ Rather, Foucault’s investigations into ethics constitute a possible groundwork for individual ethical development in the face of the modern rejection of traditional (Western) moral foundations. It is a form of stepping-stone: “People have to build their own ethics, taking as a point of departure the historical analysis,

the self and to gain access to a form of universality and which is ‘other.’ Leaving the issue of Foucault’s historical accuracy aside, there are important implications resulting from whether, or the extent to which, Foucault does ‘abstract’ ancient concepts from their historical context in order to present them as a viable modern principles or models. Frédéric Gros notes a similar methodological tension in the lecture course *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, suggesting that Foucault was torn, on the one hand, between examining techniques of the self insofar as they featured in conducting a history of sexuality, and on the other hand, investigating techniques of the self in themselves. See “Course Context” in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 513-517.

⁴⁷² Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 211-212.

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁴⁷⁴ Note, for example, the following observation by Foucault: “Each person has his or her own way of changing or, what amounts to the same thing, of perceiving that everything is changing. In this regard, nothing is more arrogant than wanting to impose one’s law on others. My way of no longer being the same is, by definition, the most singular part of what I am.” Foucault, “For an Ethics of Discomfort,” trans. Lysa Hochroth, in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, 136-137.

sociological analysis, and so on that one can provide for them. [...] All this prescriptive network has to be elaborated and transformed by people themselves.”⁴⁷⁶ Foucault thought that individuals are ultimately responsible for their own ethical self-formation. His philosophical investigations simply provide both a theoretical and practical framework to guide individuals in their respective relations to self.

Foucault’s work moreover can itself be considered as a form of philosophical ‘manual’ for ethical elaboration; a guide to constituting a relation with oneself, given the aim or desire for a particular way of life or way of being. We might look to Foucault’s description of the ancient texts that formed the objects of his analysis for the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality*:

‘practical’ texts, which are themselves objects of a ‘practice’ in that they were designed to be read, learned, reflected upon, and tested out, and they were intended to constitute the eventual framework of everyday conduct. These texts thus served as functional devices that would enable individuals to question their own conduct, to watch over and give shape to it, and to shape themselves as ethical subjects; in short, their function was ‘etho-poetic,’ to transpose a word found in Plutarch.⁴⁷⁷

Indeed, Edward F. McGushin suggests that we “read Foucault’s work as a sort of manual to the art of living philosophically.”⁴⁷⁸ Rather than a prescriptive, rule-bound approach to ethics, this manual would be more in the order of the *hupomnemata*.⁴⁷⁹ McGushin points out that in taking philosophical texts – both ancient texts and Foucault’s own offerings – in this way, the act of reading and reflecting becomes a practice of the self: an activity of *rappor à soi*. Foucault’s insight in turning to ancient texts as a starting point for founding a new ethics is that “philosophical texts

⁴⁷⁵ Paul Veyne, *Foucault*, 120.

⁴⁷⁶ Foucault, “Michel Foucault: An Interview by Stephen Riggins,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 132. Foucault also states that “It was a matter rather of showing how social mechanisms up to the present have been able to work, how forms of repression and constraint have acted, and then, starting from there, it seems to me, one left to the people themselves, knowing all the above, the possibility of self-determination and the choice of their own existence.” (“An Aesthetics of Existence,” 452.)

⁴⁷⁷ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 12-13.

⁴⁷⁸ McGushin, *Foucault’s Askēsis*, xi.

⁴⁷⁹ *Hupomnemata*, as we saw briefly in Chapter Four, refer to the journal-like written materials that the subject uses to consolidate and subjectivise things heard, seen and read. They are the

themselves can be appropriated as techniques, practical manuals, models, theories of care of the self—the activity of reading and thinking about these as such is already a practice of care, a conversion of regard toward oneself.”⁴⁸⁰ Moreover, Foucault offered his own experience of the transformational potential of philosophical work or exercise as part of this model.⁴⁸¹

But there are questions as to the viability of this approach. The first question is about the extent to which an ethic adopted from Antiquity can really be relevant and practical for modern audiences. Paul Rabinow observes for example that “Ancient Greek society was characterized by essential inequalities and nonreciprocities that moderns can only find intolerable.”⁴⁸² This is precisely one of the criticisms levelled at Foucault in terms of his interest in the idea of self-mastery.⁴⁸³ But as Rabinow goes on to suggest, “what [Foucault] identifies in the ancient world is a problematic, a way of thinking about ethical issues, and a form of practice—*askesis*—integrally linked to that thought.”⁴⁸⁴ Foucault himself states that “The whole Greek experience can be taken up again in nearly the same way by taking into account each time the differences of context and by indicating the part of this experience that one can perhaps save and the part that one can on the contrary abandon.”⁴⁸⁵ But which experiences should we save, and which ones should we abandon? Who decides what should and should not be saved? There is an element of inconsistency in Foucault’s idea that individuals should be responsible for their own ethical development (and that the foundation of this development lies in the model of an ancient ethic of the self) and the assumption that most people will rely upon intellectuals and philosophers to conduct the necessary

account books, public registers, or individual notebooks – that can serve as ‘books of life’ and ‘guides for conduct.’ (See Foucault, “Self-Writing,” 209.)

⁴⁸⁰ McGushin, *Foucault’s Askēsis*, xxi.

⁴⁸¹ McGushin argues that: “Foucault’s *work* in this last phase of his life was *himself* in the act of becoming a philosopher. The purpose of this exercise was to transform himself, to let himself be altered by the activity of thinking, and to offer this experience of self-transformation to those who would come into contact with his work.” (Ibid., xi-xii.)

⁴⁸² Paul Rabinow, “Introduction: The History of Systems of Thought,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, xxviii.

⁴⁸³ Rochlitz thinks that the prominent role that Foucault gives to the idea of self-mastery is ethically dangerous. He argues that it presupposes an asymmetrical relational structure that is really the control and subjugation of the many by a privileged few: “Foucault does not hide the fact that this is a morality destined for a small elite of masters, and that the mastery of self which he sympathetically describes is an exercise which prepares one for the mastery of others, an exercise which is very distant from any critique of domination.” (Rochlitz, “The Aesthetics of Existence,” 251.)

⁴⁸⁴ Rabinow, “Introduction: The History of Systems of Thought,” xxviii.

⁴⁸⁵ Foucault, “An Aesthetics of Existence,” 470.

groundwork that makes development possible. This would seem to undermine the possibility of breaking free of given frameworks of understanding and interpretation. I return to this problem below.

For Foucault at least it is the problem of the practice of liberty that forms the core of our shared experience with Antiquity. According to Foucault's analysis, the Greeks founded the practice of their liberty in the relationship with the self, grounded by the imperative of care for the self. His search for a renewed ethic of the self is similarly guided; he looks to Antiquity for a mode of behaviour – an *ethos* – and a mode of being; a way of *practicing* freedom. In the context of his broader project, the practice of liberty bears a political imperative because liberty is irrecoverably bound with power. It is politically significant for two reasons. First, that from a relation of freedom, relations of power can emerge. He states: "Liberation opens up new relationships of power, which have to be controlled by practices of liberty."⁴⁸⁶ By positing 'liberty' as a source of emergence of relations of power, he is able to suggest that activities which change the form of this liberty have flow-on effects for the form of relations that arise from it. This leads to the second point, which is that practices of liberty minimise domination. Foucault states explicitly in one of his final interviews that it is the ethic and practice of the self that minimizes domination in relations of power.⁴⁸⁷

In this way, Foucault links liberty with the ethic of the self. Indeed, he states that "Liberty is the ontological condition of ethics. But ethics is the deliberate form assumed by liberty."⁴⁸⁸ It seems that the field of possibilities delimited by a given relation is the condition of an ethic of the self. What does Foucault mean by 'ontological condition'? He means, on the one hand, that as freedom is a condition of relations of power, and it is relations that are constitutive of *rapport à soi*, without liberty the reflexive relation to oneself could not arise. On the other hand he means that without liberty as such, there is no question of ethics; without a conception of liberty as the opportunity to act in a variety of ways, there is no question of an ethics that grounds action and makes it meaningful. As noted in Chapter Two, Foucault's

⁴⁸⁶ Foucault, "The Ethic of Care," 4.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid., 18.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., 4.

idea of liberty is distinctly different than usually conceived under liberalism, even if it can be defined nominally as a ‘field of possibilities.’⁴⁸⁹

As a consequence it may seem that the justification of political authority and law – and of the exercise of power more generally – required by the various liberal views of freedom loses its political and moral imperative. Indeed, the apparent loss of a meaningful foundation on which to require such a justification of ‘power’ is a point upon which Foucault has been roundly criticised, as I outlined in Chapter One. Yet the fact that Foucault rejects these traditional ways of thinking about liberty does not itself entail the consequence that such questions as the basis of the justification of power become meaningless. Indeed, his location in Antiquity of the common problem of the *practice* of liberty indicates the alternative direction of Foucault’s thought about this problem. For Foucault, the problem of power is bound precisely within the practice of liberty.

Foucault posits the practice of liberty as directly concerned with morality and the ethic of the self. He questions, “what is morality, if not the practice of liberty, the deliberate practice of liberty?”⁴⁹⁰ But what does Foucault mean by the *practice* of liberty? He means both how one constitutes oneself as an ethical subject through *rapport à soi* and how one constitutes oneself in relation to others.⁴⁹¹ It implies a manner of *bearing* toward others. ‘Practice’ also implies the activities or exercises that an individual carries out as part of their *rapport à soi* and as part of the management of this liberty. In this way it also evokes the aesthetic aspect of Foucault’s ethic of the self; that is, aesthetic self-stylisation as a practice of freedom. (I examine the political implications of this idea in detail below.) To further explicate the meaning of the practice of liberty, let us turn to Foucault’s analysis of the problem as he sees it in Antiquity.

He considers the practice of liberty to be the central problem of ancient ethics, to which the precept of care for the self responds. Foucault states:

[I]n order to behave properly, in order to practice freedom properly, it

⁴⁸⁹ Foucault’s use of ‘field,’ as I have pointed out, is better understood in the sense of a political ‘domain.’ As such it bears little resemblance to a space of non-interference, nor to a state of freedom as the manifestation of the subject’s true will.

⁴⁹⁰ Foucault, “The Ethic of Care,” 4.

⁴⁹¹ Béatrice Han notes that the practice of liberty is also the “subject determining and expressing, not only his will, but his way of being through action.” (Han, *Foucault’s Critical Project*, 159.)

was necessary to care for self, both in order to know one's self [...] and to improve one's self, to surpass one's self, to master the appetites that risk engulfing you. Individual liberty was very important to the Greeks [...] not to be a slave (of another city, of those who surround you, of those who govern you, of one's own passions) was an absolutely fundamental theme: the concern for liberty was a basic and constant problem.⁴⁹²

From this passage we can identify two aspects to the relationship between care of the self and liberty as a problem. On the one hand, liberty is a problem because one needs to 'behave properly'; that is, given a field of possibilities, one needs to be able to act appropriately. Foucault thus positions the 'knowledge,' 'improvement,' 'surpassing,' and 'mastery' of one's self as the preconditions of proper behaviour. The care for one's self, then, is required in order to meet these preconditions. On the other hand, liberty is a problem because it requires maintenance; one does not want to become a 'slave' and so lose one's liberty. The care for the self, then, is also required in order to prevent enslavement. Care for the self is thus required to both *manage* and *protect* one's liberty.

However, while the ancient problem of the practice of liberty certainly resonates with Foucault, the extent to which Foucault adopts it for modernity needs to be evaluated within the context of his broader work. The problem with this idea of the practice of liberty so described is that it appears to place Foucault closer to traditional liberal ideas of autonomy. It appears as a state or possession of the individual, which can be lost or damaged, and needs to be protected not only against others but against one's own desires and will.

Of greater significance, I suggest, is the sense in which an individual's liberty gives rise to the problem of behaviour in relation to others. On the one hand, one's behaviour is a problem because how one comports oneself reflects one's ethics or care for self: "*Ethos* was the deportment and the way to behave. It was the subject's mode of being and a certain manner of acting visible to others."⁴⁹³ Behaviour or

⁴⁹² Foucault, "The Ethic of Care," 5. In his introduction to the *Hermeneutics* lectures, Arnold I. Davidson points out that Foucault places the imperative to 'know yourself' in a subordinate position to the general precept of care for the self, and thus "aims to unsettle a dominant way of reading the history of ancient philosophy." ("Introduction," in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, xix.)

⁴⁹³ Foucault, "The Ethic of Care," 6.

comportment is the “concrete expression of liberty.”⁴⁹⁴ Thus an individual’s comportment signifies to others the kind of relationship they have to themselves that enables them to practice or express their liberty in this way. According to Foucault, “One’s *ethos* was seen by his dress, by his bearing, by his gait, by the poise with which he reacts to events, etc. [...] The man who has a good *ethos*, who can be admitted and held up as an example, he is a person who practices freedom in a certain manner.”⁴⁹⁵ On the other hand, the problematisation of behaviour in relation to others recognises that an individual’s practice of liberty affects others. Foucault suggests that, “in the case of the free man, I think that the assumption of all this morality was that the one who cared for himself correctly found himself, by that very fact, in a measure to behave correctly in relationship to others and for others.”⁴⁹⁶ That is, the way that one exercise or practices one’s liberty (through care for self) is simultaneously a manner of bearing toward others. Thus Foucault formulates the care of the self as an imperative and precept that arises from the fact of individual liberty: “I am not saying that ethics is the care for self, but that in Antiquity, ethics, as a deliberate practice of liberty has turned about this basic imperative: ‘Care for yourself.’”⁴⁹⁷ This goes some way in explaining the role that Foucault envisages for the theme of care for oneself in the modern world.

In linking liberty as the political domain of action delimited by relations between subjects with relations of power, Foucault thus posits the ‘practice’ of liberty as a key idea in the relationship between power, ethics, and politics. The practice of liberty refers to the manifestation of this relationally-defined field, which is politically important because it affects the very relation from which it arises. As such, the relation of politics to ethics becomes clearer: the *ethos* founded on *rapport à soi* is the primary point of reference for political participation and activity. I return to this point below.

Transformative work: the personal ethics and public role of the intellectual

Foucault is open and explicit about what he thinks the role of the public intellectual should be, and thinks that this role is intimately tied to intellectual’s own mode of being. At the heart of this role, I argue, is the imperative to confront authority on its

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid., 5.

relation to truth. The condition of this confrontation lies, like the possibility of self-transformation opened up through intellectual endeavour, in the detachment from oneself enabled by thought and the critical attitude. This characterisation of the personal ethics and public role of the intellectual provides an insight into how Foucault thought that he should practice his own liberty. He saw his intellectual endeavours as presenting an opportunity for self-development and transformation (and in the extreme self-effacement) and his public role as bearing a certain responsibility in relation to power and politics. These present an example of Foucault's *practice* of the very ethics he proposed.

Foucault sees philosophy as grounded within exercise and activity. Recalling his characterisation of thought, we can see how philosophical activity is founded in the movement of thought: in the detachment from oneself that enables the possibility of thinking differently. As such, philosophy should be less concerned with establishing first principles or absolutes from which we might establish systems of knowledge or extrapolate a morality than with the cultivation of that which opens up the possibility of thinking 'otherwise than one thinks.' Foucault asks: "what is philosophy today—philosophical activity, I mean—if it is not the critical work that thought brings to bear on itself? In what does it consist, if not in the endeavour to know how and to what extent it may be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known?"⁴⁹⁸ Philosophical activity is precisely the critical work of calling into question what is 'known' and the conditions that appear to give rise to this knowledge. This is precisely the underlying work of Foucault's archaeo-genealogy.

But the importance and implications of this way of conceiving philosophical activity are not limited to the academic sphere. Foucault places its *ethical* significance in its effects on the mode of being of the philosopher. The *practice* of philosophy in Foucault's view constitutes an exercise of self: an activity one undertakes through which one's *rapport à soi* and mode of being are altered. Philosophical activity is an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought through which one can transform oneself. Foucault thus describes philosophical activity as an 'essay' or 'test':

The 'essay'—which should be understood as the assay or test by which, in the game of truth, one undergoes changes, and not as the simplistic appropriation of others for the purpose of communication—

⁴⁹⁸ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 8-9.

is the living substance of philosophy, at least if we assume that philosophy is still what it was in times past, i.e. an ‘ascesis,’ *askēsis*, an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought.⁴⁹⁹

This passage also points to the broader way in which Foucault thinks about ‘exercise’; his use of ‘assay’ and ‘essay’ captures elements of the practices and techniques of the self that Foucault found in Antiquity, such as examination and analysis, the effort or attempt to accomplish something, and to trial or test.

Indeed, philosophical activity as a form of ascesis is illustrated perfectly in Foucault’s own philosophical and intellectual life. He casts his own work not in academic terms, but in aesthetic ones: “You see, I hate to say it, but it’s true that I am not really a good academic. For me, intellectual work is related to what you could call ‘aestheticism,’ meaning transforming yourself. [...] I am not interested in the academic status of what I am doing because my problem is my own transformation.”⁵⁰⁰ In this way, the activities underlying Foucault’s investigations – such as reading, discussion, writing, and reflection – can be characterised as techniques of the self, similar to the ancient exercises of self that are a central focus of his late work. Foucault thus posits self-transformation as an imperative bound within the very purpose of academic enquiry: “This transformation of one’s self by one’s own knowledge is, I think, something rather close to the aesthetic experience. Why should a painter work if he is not transformed by his own painting?”⁵⁰¹ Yet the transformative aspects of this ‘work’ are not limited to the purely aesthetic. He emphasises elsewhere that this work is guided by a ‘concern for truth.’ Rather, it is more a thoughtful and considered cultivation of *rapport à soi*. Foucault states: “I would like it [intellectual work] to be an elaboration of self by self, a studious transformation, a slow, arduous process of change, guided by a constant concern for truth.”⁵⁰² As such, this elaboration should be read within the broader context of the imperative that each individual should have to maintain a *critical* relation to self. Recalling the philosophical legacy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty Foucault describes the essential, philosophical task:

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., 9. As McGushin observes: “In other words, in performing his genealogy of philosophy as ethical *parrhesia* and care of the self, Foucault is redefining and remaking himself as a philosopher, and as a political and ethical subject.” (*Foucault’s Askēsis*, 44.)

⁵⁰⁰ Foucault, “Michel Foucault: An Interview by Stephen Riggins,” 130-131.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid., 131.

⁵⁰² Foucault, “The Concern for Truth,” 264.

Never consent to be completely comfortable with your own certainties. Never let them sleep, but never believe either that a new fact will be enough to reverse them. Never imagine that one can change them like arbitrary axioms. Remember that, in order to give them an indispensable mobility, one must see far, but also close-up and right around oneself.⁵⁰³

Evoking the characterisation of thought noted in Chapter Two, he further poses intellectual work as a mode of ‘overcoming’ the self, in the sense of a distance or detachment from oneself: it is to “make oneself permanently capable of detaching oneself from oneself.”⁵⁰⁴ As we have seen, it is the capacity to call into question one’s own beliefs, attitudes and behaviour that enables the right and the capacity to adopt the critical attitude. What these passages further emphasise is that the cultivation of a ‘discomfort’ with regard to one’s certainties, in conjunction with the aesthetic work of self-stylisation, are both conditions of maintaining a critical relation to oneself. These are therefore conditions of establishing a critical attitude toward modes of power and arts of government.

Yet the implications of philosophical activity are not limited to their effects on the philosopher’s mode of being. This capacity for detachment – both from oneself and from one’s thought – is also posited as the condition for the philosopher and intellectual’s public role. “This work of altering one’s own thought and that of others,” Foucault states, “seems to me to be the intellectual’s *raison d’être*.”⁵⁰⁵ In this way, he is placing on intellectuals the responsibility to assist other people in detaching themselves from their thought, in order to then challenge their own assumptions, prejudices and dependencies. It is the philosopher’s self-detachment – manifested in the challenge and alteration of their own thought – that enables the challenge of the thought of others. The performance of the public role of the intellectual is conditioned upon the detachment brought about by thought as aesthetic practice. Foucault’s views on his own and his contemporaries’ roles reflects his characterisation of the role of the philosopher in regard to politics in Antiquity. For Foucault intellectual work functions as a form of Socratic challenge to seemingly given facts, ways of thinking, and modes of reasoning. In this way, the capacity to detach oneself from one’s thought is the

⁵⁰³ Foucault, “For an Ethics of Discomfort,” 144.

⁵⁰⁴ Foucault, “The Concern for Truth,” 263.

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 263-264.

condition for the ability – and, given Foucault’s claim that Socrates must have a certain self-relation in order to qualify him as a *basanos* (that is, a touchstone for measuring the ‘truth’ of individuals’ self-relations), the authority – to conduct this challenge.⁵⁰⁶

Returning to the more overtly political aspects of this discussion, we should here recall that the political enterprise of the critical attitude is precisely to question authority on its relation to truth, whereby one poses the possibility of disrupting established orders of knowledge, epistemological frameworks, and their corollary structures of power. Foucault is therefore positioning the philosopher and intellectual as adopting a critical attitude in regard to formal structures and institutions of power. But there are questions as to the meaning and efficacy of this conceptualisation in real political terms. This is even more so the case considering Foucault’s view of the responsibility of intellectuals to represent and act on behalf of others, as I noted above. Taken within Foucault’s broader project, moreover, the political stakes of this critical attitude are founded in its ability to resist forms of subjection and government, and thereby to open up *new* forms of subjectivity. Foucault insists that:

[T]he task of philosophy as a critical analysis of our world is something which is more and more important. Maybe the most certain of all philosophical problems is the problem of the present time, and of what we are, in this very moment. Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are. [...] We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed upon us for several centuries.⁵⁰⁷

Here Foucault appears to equivocate on what exactly the aims and political stakes of his own work (and the role of the philosopher or intellectual more generally) are. On one hand, he wants to promote new forms of subjectivity, which imply a definitive,

⁵⁰⁶ In his analyses of *parrēsia*, Foucault adopts the figure of Socrates as a *basanos* or ‘touchstone’: the element, which, through contact with the interlocutor, is able to determine or ‘test’ someone’s life. Socrates’ role as *parrhēsiastes* is thus to determine whether the interlocutor’s life is congruent with this *logos*. (See Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson [Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001], 97-98; see also *The Courage of Truth*, especially pages 144-149.) Foucault’s point is that it is only by virtue of his own relation to truth that Socrates is able to adopt such a role. It is his admission of his own ignorance – the cornerstone of Socratic wisdom – that exemplifies the critical relation to oneself: the unrest with regard to one’s thoughts, assumptions, knowledge and the behaviour that follows from these.

positive idea of a future political agenda, yet on the other hand thinks that this promotion is founded in the ‘refusal’ of given forms. While this in itself may not be particularly problematic, read in conjunction with the idea of the critical attitude, it is liable to lead to the conclusion that Foucault’s politics is overly dominated by a mere refusal of the status quo. Indeed, this is one of the points for which Foucault is criticised: he seems too often to criticise a given theory or state of affairs without offering a viable alternative for how things should be. As I have already noted, the critical attitude is founded in the refusal to be governed *like that*. Yet in the passage noted above as elsewhere Foucault wants to promote new forms of subjectivity, to promote possibilities for being other than one is. The question, then, is to what extent do Foucault’s views on the role of the philosopher and intellectual, and on the relationship between philosophy and politics more generally, support this latter political objective?

His view of the relationship between philosophy and politics aligns more closely with the idea of refusal. Foucault states:

[T]he relations between philosophy and politics are not to be sought in the possible ability of philosophy to tell the truth about the best way to exercise power. After all, it is for politics itself to know and define the best ways of exercising power. It is not for philosophy to tell the truth about this [...] It is not for philosophy to tell power what to do, but it has to exist as truth-telling in a certain relation to political action; nothing more, nothing less.⁵⁰⁸

From this passage it is clear that Foucault does not think that the role of the philosopher is to advise on how governments should exercise their power. While this is in keeping with his tendency to avoid committing to particular political ideologies in his published works and interviews, it is less consistent with his personal political activism.⁵⁰⁹ In any case, what this demonstrates is that Foucault does not see his role as a public intellectual to tell those in power what they should or should not do, or more importantly, what qualifies as a legitimate exercise of power. Rather, what is made clear in this passage is how closely Foucault aligns the intellectual role with the

⁵⁰⁷ Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” 785.

⁵⁰⁸ Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, 286.

idea of the critical attitude. It is precisely to speak truth to power. This is to call to account the implicit assumptions, implications and consequences of political actions. It is to speak the truth about political actions from without the discursive framework in which they are carried out and legitimised. It is to call into question the *discourses* surrounding and legitimising political actions. It is finally to question the validity of a given discourse and the actions it purports to legitimise. Foucault's approach is to describe how things are – whether it is about the operation of disciplinary power, the state of hospitals and prisons – to speak the truth in relation to political action. Philosophy, Foucault notes, “does not tell the truth of political action, it does not tell the truth for political action, it tells the truth in relation to political action, in relation to the practice of politics, in relation to the political personage. And this is what I call a recurrent, permanent, and fundamental feature of the relationship of philosophy to politics.”⁵¹⁰

Yet there are times when Foucault appears to promote a more active form of engagement. It is not that the nature of the engagement is different – he still characterises it principally in terms of critique – but the objectives of this engagement are different. In this case it appears that the intellectual's public responsibility lies in disrupting congealed arrangements of power in order to give rise to the potential for political and institutional change. It is through the alteration of thought that such change – what Foucault calls ‘deep transformation’ – is achieved. Foucault observes that, “the work of deep transformation can only be carried out in a free atmosphere, one constantly agitated by a permanent criticism.”⁵¹¹ This is where the work of the intellectual comes to the fore: to agitate through critique.⁵¹² Socrates, by contrast, criticises and challenges Athenians in their assumptions and modes of discourse, yet ultimately demonstrates respect for the laws of Athens in submitting to the Assembly's verdict. (Foucault notes that in the *Crito* Socrates posits the city's laws as the agent of care [*epimeleia*] for its citizens, whereby he refuses to undermine them by

⁵⁰⁹ This is well documented in the various biographies on Foucault. See, for example, Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, trans. Betsy Wing (London: Faber and Faber, 1993); and David Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault: A Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

⁵¹⁰ Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, 288.

⁵¹¹ Foucault, “Practicing Criticism,” in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, 155.

⁵¹² Foucault suggests: “His role [the intellectual], since he works specifically in the realm of thought, is to see how far the liberation of thought can make those transformations urgent enough for people to want to carry them out and difficult enough to carry out for them to be profoundly rooted in reality.” (Ibid.)

escaping.⁵¹³) Foucault, however, explicitly seeks to challenge institutional arrangements of power, primarily by calling into question the foundations upon which their claims to legitimacy and authority rest. Thus Foucault asserts: “A critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest.”⁵¹⁴ To critique in this sense is to point out the modes of thought underlying people’s behaviour and actions: to call to account the unacknowledged assumptions, prejudices, and the implicit values and beliefs in modes of discourse and ways of thinking that are given (and accepted) as authoritative, objective, or true. While criticism might then be thought of as preparatory work, this does not do justice to its imperative power. Critique *forces* transformation: “as soon as one can no longer think things as one formerly thought them, transformation becomes both very urgent, very difficult, and quite possible.”⁵¹⁵ Out of criticism arises not only the imperative to think differently, but to do things differently.

Thus for Foucault critique founded on thought is indispensable to real political, governmental and institutional change. The possibility of reform turns upon the movement from critique to transformation. But what is reform? For Foucault it is the expression of a new arrangement of power relations.⁵¹⁶ It is the result of political-governmental transformation. In this realm criticism disrupts the modes of thought and political discourses that support a particular arrangement of power, its associated organizations, and established ways of doing things. Foucault emphasizes that, “If at the base there has not been the work of thought upon itself and if, in fact, modes of thought, that is to say modes of action, have not been altered, whatever the project for reform, we know that it will be swamped, digested by modes of behaviour and institutions that will always be the same.”⁵¹⁷ This point deserves reiteration: political and institutional change that does not have at its base the challenge and alteration of thinking cannot give rise to real reform. As Foucault argues, “A transformation that remains within the same mode of thought, a transformation that is only a way of

⁵¹³ See Foucault’s discussion of the theme of care of the self, principally in regard to the *Apology* and *Crito* in *The Courage of Truth*, especially 73-116.

⁵¹⁴ Foucault, “Practicing Criticism,” 154.

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid.*

adjusting the same thought more closely to the reality of things can merely be a superficial transformation.”⁵¹⁸

In this way, Foucault ties the critical function of the work of the intellectual to the possibility of government founded in a critical approach. As such, Foucault proposes a different model for the relationship between governments (or the governor) and the governed. What is significant is that the work of thought in itself is not enough; that is, governments cannot rely upon their own capacity for critical thought; this work must be carried out in conjunction with intellectuals.⁵¹⁹ In one interview, following the election of Socialist President François Mitterrand in 1981, he poses the possibility of ‘working with’ government as an alternative to the conventional model of obedience. It is an interesting idea because Foucault poses the possibility of intellectuals working with governments to improve their capacity for reflective and critical thinking, yet considers this as neither compromising intellectuals’ capacity to criticize or challenge that government, nor their capacity for resistance. “To work with a government,” Foucault suggests, “implies neither subjection nor total acceptance. One may work with it and yet be restive.”⁵²⁰

Contrary to claims that Foucault lacks political pragmatism, this presents instead a viable model for the relationship between intellectuals and government. It is a model that combines the philosopher’s recalcitrance in pointing out the assumptions and limitations of other people’s thoughts, attitudes and beliefs, while committing to the transformation of those thoughts, attitudes and beliefs. It is not merely a matter of transgressing the limits imposed by given discourses and epistemic frames, nor of merely tearing down the governing frameworks and institutions of one’s life. Indeed, as I have begun to suggest, and as I argue further below, the way that Foucault’s formulates political activity (particularly in aesthetic terms) relies on the continuing existence of at least parts of those frameworks and institutions in order to make those activities meaningful. It is to strike a balance between the recognition of the contingency of such frameworks and institutions that make transgression possible, yet maintaining one’s relation and reference to those frameworks which make one’s

⁵¹⁸ Ibid., 155.

⁵¹⁹ See Foucault, “The Concern for Truth,” 266-267. Foucault was making this point in reference to the strain in French-Polish relations under Communism following the Second World War, but as a general point it is consistent with Foucault’s political and philosophical views more generally.

⁵²⁰ Foucault, “Practicing Criticism,” 154.

actions meaningful. As I point out in Chapter Six, this gives rise to a certain critical problem: namely, that such a dependence on those frameworks, institutions, norms and so forth appears to undermine the critical capacity of such activities. It is sufficient to note here, however, that the aesthetic terms within which Foucault describes and conceives his own intellectual work, and public responsibility, are not averse to a certain political pragmatism. Indeed, Foucault clearly has a strong sense of the responsibility that intellectuals bear toward the societies in which they live. Before turning to the problems with the critical attitude, I examine first the political implications of Foucault's emphasis on aesthetic practices.

Ethics and aesthetics

In Chapter Four I argued that Foucault turns to ancient ethics in order to begin the politically indispensable task of constituting an ethic of the self. His subsequent recourse to the aesthetic has sparked diverging appraisals of its implications for his broader account of ethics and its underlying political objectives. There are two significant themes requiring examination. The first issue in this regard is the status that others are given within an aesthetic framework: are others relegated to the status of inert instruments to be used in my self-stylisation? Or might aesthetics constitute an original way of conceiving of my ethical responsiveness to others? The second issue is whether – and if so, the extent to which – aesthetics can be thought in terms of politics. That is, whether aesthetic practices can constitute political activity, or, at the very least, whether they contain the possibility of having effects beyond the apparently 'private' realm in which they are carried out.

Foucault's desire to place aesthetics at the heart of his philosophical response to the problems of modernity is, of course, inspired by Nietzsche. Like Nietzsche, Foucault turns to the idea of aesthetic self-formation because it presents the possibility of *creating* the values and principles that fall vacant under the critique of modernity. Nietzsche, after sweeping aside both the Kantian legacy of the categorical imperative and the idea that right action follows inner moral feeling, avers that "We, however, *want to become those we are*—human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves."⁵²¹ The problem, as MacIntyre describes it in *After Virtue*, is "how to construct in an entirely original way, how to

⁵²¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, § 335, 266.

invent a new table of what is good and a law, a problem which arises for each individual.”⁵²² On first appearance Foucault’s project – to give style and content to a contemporary ethic of the self – seems close to that of Nietzsche. But we must not get carried away by over-emphasizing the Nietzschean elements in Foucault’s idea of the aesthetic: while Foucault does explicitly locate his view as close to Nietzsche (and certainly closer to Nietzsche than Sartre), the *content* of this aesthetics is derived more from ancient ethics.⁵²³ In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche proclaims that “*One thing is needful.*— To ‘give style’ to one’s character—a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye.”⁵²⁴ For Nietzsche the project of self-creation and stylization is less concerned with the betterment of one’s character than with smoothing out the bumps and flaws.

For Foucault the aim of constituting a ‘beautiful life’ is less concerned with artistic self-creation than with the *care* of the self. This is not to deny Foucault’s use of artistic analogies: he does suggest how our ethical self-formation might be likened to the process of creating a work of art. For example, Foucault suggests that “One can comport oneself towards oneself in the role of technician, of a craftsman, of an artist, who from time to time stops working, examines what he is doing, reminds himself of the rules of his art, and compares these rules with what he has achieved thus far.”⁵²⁵ In this way Foucault takes up the sense in which *rapport à soi* involves work upon the self, which he describes as a form of asceticism: “the self-forming activity (*pratique de soi*) or *l’ascétisme*—*asceticism* in a very broad sense.”⁵²⁶ Yet the artistic analogy should not be taken too far.

Artistic self-creation is for Foucault only a part of the aesthetics of existence that he adopts from Antiquity. Elsewhere he describes ascetic practices as “an exercise of self upon self by which one tries to work out, to transform one’s self and to attain a certain mode of being.”⁵²⁷ In *The Use of Pleasure*, furthermore, Foucault describes the ‘arts of existence’ of ancient Greco-Roman culture as “those intentional and voluntary

⁵²² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 114.

⁵²³ See Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” 262.

⁵²⁴ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, § 290, 232.

⁵²⁵ Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 166.

⁵²⁶ Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” 265.

actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria.”⁵²⁸ Here aesthetic activity is not the creation of the self, as such, but the transformation of the self. As Butler notes, aesthetic self-creation refers to the delimiting of those parts of the self that form the object of aesthetic work: not the primary creation of the self *ex nihilo*.⁵²⁹ Keeping in mind the four folds of *rapport à soi*, aesthetic or ascetic work is only one aspect of the relationship with oneself which emerges from originary relations with others, not through aesthetic activity. As a work of art one’s life does have elements of the aesthetic in the way that Nietzsche conceives it, but for Foucault this is not the whole story.

He does not go as far as Nietzsche: Foucault does not attempt to create a completely new ‘table of good.’ For Foucault aesthetic activities take place within the context of an individual’s position in society. While they do – and these are the terms in which an ethic of the self is politically indispensable – seek to challenge and to transform the individual’s relation to structures of power-knowledge, aesthetic activities are nevertheless conducted within the discursive and epistemological frameworks of a given society. Recalling Butler’s description of the social norms that ‘precede and exceed’ the subject, it is clear that Foucault’s aestheticization of the subject takes place *in relation to* existing tables of good. Such self-creation, then, is always in tension with these already-existing norms; it is the constant ‘agonism,’ to use Foucault’s terminology, between the subjectivising effects of such codes and norms and the subject’s efforts to constitute herself.

For many commentators, Foucault’s turn to the aesthetic is a source of consternation, cementing his position as only concerned with an ethic of the self because it promotes the exercise of power and the maintenance of asymmetrical relationships. Under this reading Foucault’s appropriation of an aesthetic model subordinates ‘ethics’ to the pursuit of a ‘beautiful life’—where ‘beauty’ is understood

⁵²⁷ Foucault, “The Ethic of Care,” 2.

⁵²⁸ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 10-11.

⁵²⁹ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 17. Butler also makes this point in “What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue,” see especially 226: “The self forms itself, but it forms itself within a set of formative practices that are characterised as modes of subjectivations. That the range of its possible forms is delimited in advance by such modes of subjectivation does not mean that the self fails to form itself, that the self is fully formed. On the contrary, it is

in its superficial, sensual sense, which Bennett describes usefully as “the province of a reactive, undisciplined sensuality.”⁵³⁰ In this view, she suggests, the possibility of a ‘cultivated’ aesthetic response is obscured, whereby Foucault’s aesthetics appears as an unconditioned *self* centered concern for one’s own stylization. The practices and techniques of the self of which the aestheticization of the subject is a partial result are “presented as merely ‘aesthetic’—that is, concerning a pleasing, sensuous, and superficial style or appearance—rather than seriously ‘ethical.’”⁵³¹ From this perspective Foucault’s idea of the aesthetic would appear much closer to Nietzsche. The aesthetic model becomes the primary framework through which individuals encounter and interact with each other. Richard Wolin, for example, observes that:

[O]nce an aesthetic outlook becomes the sole determinant of life, its insensitivity to other values ultimately translates into an insensitivity to other persons qua ends in themselves. They are viewed as the pliable objects of aesthetic fashioning, raw materials to be integrated into a grandiose aesthetic spectacle that is not of their own making.⁵³²

He comments further that Foucault’s ethics “favors either an attitude of narcissistic self-absorption or one of outwardly directed, aggressive self-aggrandizement. In neither case is there a discernable trace of human solidarity, mutuality, or fellow-feeling.”⁵³³ For Wolin the characterisation of ethics as *aesthetic* is tantamount to egoism, where relations to others are only meaningful insofar as they are instrumental in an individual’s aesthetic pursuit.

Furthermore, the charge goes, Foucault not only relegates the ethical status of the other – whose primacy is assumed to be at the heart of any meaningful ethics – to a secondary position after the self, but restricts the very availability of such an ethical model to those with the (economic, political, cultural and social) means to place this pursuit at the centre of their existence. Rainer Rochlitz, for example, argues that the aesthetic project presented in Foucault’s ethics “is a project for privileged minorities, liberated from all functions in the material reproduction of society, who can use all

compelled to form itself, but to form itself within forms that are already more or less in operation and underway.”

⁵³⁰ Bennett, “How is It, Then,” 654.

⁵³¹ *Ibid.*, 658.

⁵³² Richard Wolin, “Foucault’s Aesthetic Decisionism,” in *Telos* 19, no. 2 (spring 1986), 85.

⁵³³ *Ibid.*

their strength to perfect the refinement of their lifestyle.”⁵³⁴ Foucault however anticipates this criticism when he points out that in the ancient context the care for the self *was* limited to privileged citizens. He observes that the care of the self as an art of living in the first and second centuries was limited to “the social groups, very limited in number, that were bearers of culture and for whose members a *techne tou biou* could have a meaning and a reality.”⁵³⁵ Nevertheless, this problem cannot be easily put aside. If we approach this problem by considering the states or conditions that prevented the rest of society from accessing the care of the self, which for Foucault is principally that these individuals had no liberty – and therefore their liberty was not conceived as a problem which *required* a response – then we can see that the modern context would share similar problems. We may well point to Foucault’s disclaimers about his adoption of ancient ideas and suggest that he would have wanted the aesthetic ideal to be available to all ‘free subjects.’ But the political reality is that it is not, and many people would not meet the criteria by which to be considered ‘free subjects’ anyway.

Part of the problem of Foucault’s use of an aesthetic model is that it leads to misunderstandings about the *aim* of his broader idea of ethics and the *means* of achieving this aim. In the former case, it is assumed that aesthetics takes as its sole aim the production and attainment of a ‘beautiful life.’ This is partly founded on the idea that aesthetics eclipses all other concerns, and the assumption – which is not well founded – that a beautiful life necessarily disadvantages others. But why couldn’t a beautiful life include beautiful relationships with others? Why, moreover, must the characterisation of an ethic of the self in aesthetic terms necessarily signify a shift toward an egoistic ethic of the self that signifies a turning-away from, an indifference to, worldly problems? Doesn’t this offer a rather one-dimensional view of what such an ethic might be?

In this analysis I draw upon Jane Bennett’s discussion of the two key contributions that aesthetic terms can make in characterizing such an ethic. First, that the analogous use of aesthetic terms to characterize techniques of the self emphasizes the creative nature of subjectivation and the fabricated nature of subjects; they are likened to “things worked and reworked in ways never free from the mark or force of

⁵³⁴ Rochlitz, “The Aesthetics of Existence,” 255.

⁵³⁵ Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 45.

prior embodiments, intentions, or accidents.”⁵³⁶ Aesthetic terms do not only describe the ways in which the ethical formation of the subject is analogous to creating a work of art, they capture the interplay of these processes with the broader processes of subjectivation—the way that existing structures of power-knowledge both affect and effect the subject.

Second, this analogy invites a different way of conceptualizing both the nature of ethical response and, further, the very recognition of the ethical scene. Bennett describes the latter: “insofar as ‘art’ is thought to call for a special mode of perception, that is, an attention to things as sensuous *ensembles* (scenes, songs, stories, dances), an artistic representation of ethics may reveal with special force its structural or network character.”⁵³⁷ This is especially useful in approaching the way in which the elements of Foucault’s ethics are embedded within the social sphere – like many practices of the self – and indeed are even coextensive with other aspects of social interaction. It is useful, moreover, in approaching ethics as integrating (or concerned with the interaction of) different elements of Foucault’s conception of the social. This is particularly the case with the interplay of *rapport à soi* with social relations, and the role of aesthetic practices in response to governmental technologies and political power.

For Bennett, the aesthetic forms a necessary and meaningful part of ethics: what she calls the ‘aesthetic sensibility’ is a condition for the possibility of enacting ethical ideals.⁵³⁸ This sensibility is “the quality or character of sensuous experience, a character that is culturally encoded and temperamentally delimited, but also educable (to some degree) through careful techniques of the self.”⁵³⁹ As a disciplined and mediated form of sensuousness turned outward, the aesthetic sensibility is concerned with the capacity for a certain mode of response: “For as a form of *askesis*, a sensibility establishes the range of possibility in perception, enactment, and responsiveness to others.”⁵⁴⁰ This re-focuses our attention on aesthetic activities as a part of Foucault’s idea of ethical and ascetic practices: as *techniques* of the self. Indeed we can think of aesthetic activities as developing the capacity for a certain

⁵³⁶ Bennett, “How is It, Then,” 667.

⁵³⁷ Ibid.

⁵³⁸ Ibid., 654.

⁵³⁹ Ibid.

mode of ethical response to others in much the same way as the care of the self enables care for others.

Contrary to the critical views outlined above, aesthetic practices do not subsume others as mere means in the pursuit of the beautiful life. This implies that ethics conceived partly in aesthetic terms cannot be complementary; that one person's aesthetic practices will necessarily be antagonistic or harmful to another's. It suggests, moreover, that any participation of others in my aesthetic practices will be as 'pliable objects': that is, without self-determination in their participation, easily manipulated to my will, and necessarily without investment in the outcome of this practice. Others are not *manipulated* or *taken advantage of* through my aestheticization. There is little in Foucault's descriptions of practices of the self to suggest that the one whose assistance is claimed is diminished by and through this claim. Such a reading ignores the deeply social and interconnected nature of Foucault's ideas of ethics and the subject; it also ignores the safeguard provided by the structural condition of Foucault's 'free subject': that recalcitrance is always possible.

Furthermore, it is the possibility of antagonism that opens up within aesthetic practices both the possibility of reciprocity and a platform for politics. William Connolly frames this reciprocal possibility in political terms, suggesting that it indicates a relationship of 'agonistic respect' between individuals. Connolly defines this as "a social relation of respect for the opponent against whom you define yourself even while you resist its imperatives and strive to delimit its spaces of hegemony."⁵⁴⁰ While the techniques of the self represent the opportunity for moving beyond imposed limitations, and thus towards 'otherness,' the self-imposed delimitation from others that this represents does not necessarily result in a complete agonism: the challenge inherent in the transformation of the self is not necessarily a removal of oneself from others. Connolly argues that the antagonism bound up in resistance "can be translated into something closer to agonistic respect in some cases, as each party comes to appreciate the extent to which its self-definition is bound up with the other and the degree to which the comparative projections of both are contestable."⁵⁴² Connolly

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid. This sensibility forms the capacity for "sensuously engaged responsiveness to others," which, drawing on Schiller, Bennett argues is essential to a broader conception of ethics than merely a code morality. (Ibid., 655.)

⁵⁴¹ William E. Connolly, "Beyond Good and Evil: The Ethical Sensibility of Michel Foucault," in *Political Theory* 21, no. 3 (August 1993), 381.

⁵⁴² Ibid., 382.

emphasizes that this is merely an *invitation* to a reciprocal, albeit agonistic, respect which may be refused; but at the very least it opens up the potential for reciprocal acknowledgement of the contingency of the moral or ethical models to which each adhere. In Connolly's words:

In this way, space for politics can be opened through a degree of reciprocity amid contestation; new possibilities for the negotiation of difference are created by identifying traces in the other of the sensibility one identifies in oneself and locating in the self elements of the sensibility attributed to the other. An element of care is built into contestation and of contestation into care.⁵⁴³

It is precisely because aesthetic activity cannot be carried out in isolation that the political dimension becomes apparent.

For Foucault the creation of values occurs (understood partly as developing an ethic of the self) in tension with the values and social norms of the society in which an individual lives; part of the aesthetic challenge is to establish a mode of being *in relation to* others and the world. Aesthetic practices are, in this sense, worldly. What is significant about this aspect of Foucault's ethics is the way that aesthetic practices ground an individual's ethical response – both to others and more generally to the problem of liberty – in their unique position within the world. Bernauer and Mahon describe how this offers a meaningful alternative to other ethical models:

The notion of stylization does remove ethics from the quest for universal standards of behaviour that legislate conformity and normalization, reducing men and women to a mode of existence in accordance with a least common denominator. It focuses upon *the dimension of human freedom distinctive of an individual's place or role in life* [my italics].⁵⁴⁴

But this is not an unproblematic move. Indeed Foucault saw in the ancient notion of an aesthetics of existence a tension between an ostensibly individual stylization and the desire for a form of universality. In identifying three different domains of stylization – one's *rapport à soi*, one's conduct, and one's relations with others – Foucault points out that “Antiquity never stopped asking if it were possible to define a style common

⁵⁴³ Ibid.

to these different domains of conduct.”⁵⁴⁵ He considered the search for a ‘common style’ to be a significant problem: “They were stymied right away by what seems to me to be the point of contradiction of ancient morality: between on the one hand this obstinate search for a certain style of existence and, on the other, the effort to make it common to everyone.”⁵⁴⁶ It is clear then that if Foucault was proposing ‘aesthetics’ as a viable model for ethics in modernity, he would not think that it should be ‘common to everyone.’⁵⁴⁷ But this does not end inevitably in the kind of aesthetic egoism that critics such as Wolin claim. As demonstrated above, aesthetics enables a genuine responsiveness to others; but it also has certain political implications, as I argue below.

Moreover, in characterising ethics as a purely aesthetic task in the Nietzschean sense (where the aim of ethics is nothing other than to make one’s life superficially beautiful, and where one creates for oneself one’s own table of good) aesthetic activity is posited as completely divorced from day-to-day life.⁵⁴⁸ As such aesthetic practices are divorced from social, cultural and political concerns. For Rochlitz, Foucault’s move to the aesthetic signals the end of his concern with the operation of and resistance to power: “the point is to reflect on a new way of conducting one’s life, on the use which one makes of pleasure and on the care which one takes of oneself, in a way which is unrelated to any norm or social control, but has the sole purpose of leading a beautiful life.”⁵⁴⁹ It is this view that leads to criticism about the perceived lack of political dimension to an ethic of the self conceived partly in aesthetic terms.

⁵⁴⁴ Bernauer and Mahon, “The Ethics of Michel Foucault,” 153.

⁵⁴⁵ Foucault, “The Return of Morality,” 466.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid. We might hear here an echo of Nietzsche’s dismissal of the ‘selfishness’ inherent in the Kantian desire to universalize our own moral judgments. (See *The Gay Science*, § 335, 265.)

⁵⁴⁷ Paul Rabinow observes that “The offending term appears to be ‘common,’ understood as uniform. Foucault definitely rejected two possible interpretations of what ‘common could mean: either that a class location or professional identity was the sine qua non of liberty and, hence, of ethics; or that everyone would have the same stylization. Foucault unequivocally equated the latter project with normalization and the will to knowledge, and there is no reason to believe he ever entertained the former (although the issue of ‘leisure’ to pursue such questions remains unaddressed).” (Rabinow, “Introduction: The History of Systems of Thought,” xxix.)

⁵⁴⁸ See Wolin, “Foucault’s Aesthetic Decisionism.” As we have already seen, Wolin thinks that rather than constituting a specific sphere, Foucault’s ethics generalizes aesthetic ideas throughout all aspects of life and thus renders other spheres, such as science and morality, as secondary concerns.

⁵⁴⁹ Rochlitz, “The Aesthetics of Existence,” 251.

Aesthetics and politics

Probably the most significant question when evaluating the purpose and implications of the aesthetic to an ethic of power is whether, or to what extent, aesthetic activity is concerned with the political. That is, whether the creative task of self-formation has effects and implications beyond the apparently ‘private’ sphere in which it is carried out. Critics of Foucault’s recourse to the aesthetic tend to presuppose a more or less strong distinction between the public and private spheres: aesthetic practices are seen as essentially private activities and thus lack any political potential.

Richard Rorty, who does not find the project of self-creation to be in itself problematic, thinks that it is nevertheless ultimately incommensurable with political ideals such as human solidarity.⁵⁵⁰ What is interesting about Rorty’s view is that he seems to think that while creative activity is not necessarily limited to the private realm (and Rorty does promote a strong distinction between the public and private), it certainly ought to be. Indeed Rorty suggests that we “*Privatize* the Nietzschean-Sartrean-Foucauldian attempt at authenticity and purity, in order to prevent yourself from slipping into a political attitude which will lead you to think that there is some social goal more important than avoiding cruelty.”⁵⁵¹ Alexander Nehamas thus summarizes Rorty’s view: “Private projects of self-creation have no direct implications (in fact, they have no implications at all, in his view) for public projects directed at changing how people live.”⁵⁵² Rorty’s point is that self-creation should remain a private practice precisely because of our interrelation and interdependence with others; aesthetic activities fail on political grounds because it is assumed that self-creation does not, by definition, have the interests of others – Rorty is particularly concerned with the liberal ideal of minimizing cruelty – at its heart.⁵⁵³

One of the reasons that Rorty gives for the opposition of aesthetics to politics is that private self-creation with the ideal of autonomy cannot be embodied in traditional

⁵⁵⁰ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), xv.

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁵⁵² Nehamas, “Nietzsche, Modernity, Aestheticism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, eds. Bernd Magnus and Kathleen M. Higgins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 236.

⁵⁵³ Rochlitz: “The fact that everyone can claim to be treated in the same way and claim the same fundamental rights counts less for Nietzsche and Foucault than the consequences of this sort of claim for the aristocratic culture of the art of life. Yet is it really necessary to choose between an elite’s art of life and the universality of rights?” (“The Aesthetics of Existence,” 253.)

liberal, public institutions.⁵⁵⁴ This is partly because the apparently egoistic and narcissistic values underpinning aesthetics cannot be reconciled with liberal values. But it is also because such individualistic values cannot be universalised in order to form institutionally guaranteed rights. He argues, therefore, that “Ironist theorists like Hegel, Nietzsche, Derrida, and Foucault seem to me invaluable in our attempt to form a private self-image, but pretty much useless when it comes to politics.”⁵⁵⁵ Gutting, too, thinks that some of the appeal for Foucault in aesthetics is that it renders ethics an ‘essentially private enterprise.’⁵⁵⁶ Yet even though he reads aesthetic practices as essentially private, Gutting does not think that this precludes the possibility that political activity can form part of a beautiful life.⁵⁵⁷

Overly influenced by Nietzsche, and ignoring its ancient foundations, such views overlook the political possibilities of Foucault’s idea of aesthetic activity.⁵⁵⁸ But this is why *Foucault’s* idea of aesthetic ethics is so promising: Foucault returns to aesthetic activities, and to an ethic of the self more broadly, the political dimensions that previous modern attempts including Nietzsche’s lacked. Indeed, while Nietzsche’s self-creation is not directly political, this is not because aesthetic activities have no bearing upon others: “Nietzsche is perfectly aware that in making something out of oneself, even if one tries to do so in the most private of terms, one also changes (if one writes books that get to be read) what many others will think and do as well. And what others do, which determines what they are, will also determine much else besides.”⁵⁵⁹ The whole of Foucault’s account of *rapport à soi* as the foundation of an

⁵⁵⁴ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 65. In Rorty’s words: “The sort of autonomy which self-creating ironists like Nietzsche, Derrida, or Foucault seek is not the sort of thing that *could* ever be embodied in social institutions. Autonomy is not something which all human beings have within them and which society can release by ceasing to repress them. It is something which certain particular human beings hope to attain by self-creation, and which a few actually do. The desire to be autonomous is not relevant to the liberal’s desire to avoid cruelty and pain – a desire which Foucault shared, even though he was unwilling to express it in those terms.”

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁵⁵⁶ Gary Gutting, *Thinking the Impossible: French Philosophy Since 1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 144.

⁵⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 145. Gutting points to Foucault’s own political activism on behalf of marginalized persons and groups.

⁵⁵⁸ Bennett, “How is It, Then,” 655. Bennett points out that critiques of Foucault’s aestheticization of ethics not only presuppose, without discussion, certain ideas of the aesthetic which are then brought to Foucault’s account, but tend to presuppose a certain commitment to the value of a code morality over one with an aesthetic element. She writes, “their arguments are based on the underargued presumption that if one does not endorse a ‘command’ ethics one has no ethics at all. Only a code-centred model can ensure a care for others.” (*Ibid.*, 667.)

⁵⁵⁹ Nehamas, “Nietzsche, modernity, aestheticism,” 238.

ethic of the self, including its emphasis on aesthetic or ascetic practices, is founded on the idea that individuals' respective modes of being (and the various activities and practices that transform these modes) bear upon each other. As Nehamas argues, "What we take ourselves to be is essentially connected to how we propose to treat one another: The public and the private intermix and philosophy, for better or worse, often has political implications."⁵⁶⁰ Thus the ways we understand ourselves, form ourselves and relate to ourselves forms the basis of our interaction with and treatment of others.

Their embeddedness within common frameworks of interpretation and existing moral structures renders aesthetic self-formation vulnerable to the influence and direction of subjectivation (*assujettissement*). The moral code, not to mention the social and formal institutions and laws with reference to which an individual constitutes their *rapport à soi* limit creative activity that would negatively affect others.⁵⁶¹ We can recall here Bennett's point that ethics is a matter of reflective heteronomy that requires individuals to carve out a space within which their self-forming activity is carried out. Gutting puts it a slightly different way: "Such an aesthetics derives from an individual's distinctive taste, so that the ethical formation it guides allows for an existence that avoids the full force of social power structures by finding a location within the interstices of these structures where the individual as such can flourish."⁵⁶² For Foucault, re-constituting an ethic of the self includes re-establishing aesthetic activities as ethically and politically important. Gutting frames this point in even stronger terms, arguing that Foucault might well conceive the project of self-creation and self-perfection as a universal human good.⁵⁶³ Under this reading Foucault would not only conceive of political activity as part of making his own life beautiful, but that this political activity would itself promote the possibility that others might have the same opportunity. In this view, the liberal ideal of promoting difference and individual flourishing would be reasonably healthy. In this view, aesthetic ethics would be consistent with, or at the very least not averse to, the liberal project of loosening institutional grips over marginalized individuals.

Modern liberalism is certainly not averse to a certain idea of self-creation. There is the sentiment in Mill that self-elaboration and self-perfection, as long as it does not bear negatively upon others, actually has positive implications for human beings as a

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁶¹ Gutting makes precisely this point. See *Thinking the Impossible*, 145.

⁵⁶² Ibid., 144.

whole: that the totality of individuals will itself be improved by the individual development and perfection of each.⁵⁶⁴ Indeed, Mill makes the following point, which seems to echo in Foucault (even if he would not admit it): “In proportion to the development of his individuality, each person becomes more valuable to himself, and is therefore capable of being more valuable to others.”⁵⁶⁵ This captures one of the central ethical and political sentiments of Foucault’s return to Antiquity: one cares for oneself in order to properly care for others.

On one hand, then, there is the idea that aesthetic practices are by definition ‘private’ activities. As such, they are practiced within the private realm and have little or no bearing on the public, political realm. On the other hand is the idea that aesthetic practices can have implications for politics. But for scholars such as Rorty, this is precisely why aesthetic activities should be confined to the private sphere. Assuming an ultimately egoistic account of aesthetics, the latter is viewed as incommensurable with ‘common’ human values which are thought to be the purview of the political sphere, and which are captured in public institutions. However, an evaluation of the implications of Foucault’s idea of aesthetic activities for politics must take greater heed of Foucault’s broader ideas about political power. Before turning to this point, however, I investigate whether aesthetic activities really do offer meaningful alternatives for political action and resistance.

The critical and political potential of practices of the self

To enable modern individuals to develop different subjectivities and modes of being is the most important philosophical and political objective of Foucault’s work. He worked from the premise that to constitute oneself in relation to the prevailing discourses and power formations of one’s time is the cornerstone of political activity. Rather than seeking to justify this view, Foucault focuses instead on the conditions of this self-constitution and on the various forms that it may take. Central to these is the idea that self-constitution as a form of resistance involves (although is not limited to) taking a ‘critical attitude.’ As I noted in Chapter Two, for Foucault the origins of this critical attitude lie in the refusal of the arts of government of the sixteenth century. In

⁵⁶³ Ibid., 145.

⁵⁶⁴ See John Stuart Mill, “On Liberty” in *On Liberty and Other Essays*, Ed. John Gray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 70.

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid.

our own time the first problem is to refuse the models and definitions of ‘power’ that have since permeated philosophical and political thought. This means rejecting too the ideas of ‘freedom’ and ‘resistance’ to which we have turned in order to call into question given exercises and formations of power.

But in rejecting these ideas, Foucault does not do away with the idea of the critical attitude. Indeed, it forms the key to understanding Foucault’s reformulation of the idea of ‘resistance.’ If the critical attitude embodies the refusal to be governed *like that*, then resistance is the actualisation of this refusal in activities that counter the mechanisms and techniques of a given governmental rationality. The problem is not, as I have made clear, one of identifying the universal norms or *a priori* concepts from which a transcendent critique might be made possible. It lies instead in locating the foundations from which such a critical stance can be adopted. Thus before examining the critical attitude in more detail, more needs to be said about the capacity for the aesthetic practices of self-stylisation to found this stance.

The political force of techniques of the self arises from the fact that self-constitution often occurs in tension with prevailing mechanisms of subjectivation [*assujettissement*]. Foucault adopts the model of ancient practices – for example, those involved in dietetics – with a view to giving content to a modern ethic of the self. Such practices are supposed to offer examples of how past and existing modes of subjectivity can be challenged and transformed. As such, these practices and techniques are only meaningful insofar as they are conceptually consistent with Foucault’s broader ideas about ‘power.’ But they must also offer concrete ideas for how these ideas can be adopted and re-deployed in modern society.

Foucault’s analysis of dietetics in *The Use of Pleasure* has especially resonated with modern audiences, and feminist philosophers in particular. This is because it provides a unique point of analysis for the operation of disciplining and normalising mechanisms of power in modern societies. In addition, these analyses contribute to a re-reading of Foucault’s account of docile bodies, as discussed in Chapters One and Two. In this way it is especially useful in illustrating how Foucault’s later texts are thematically consistent with the work on power.

In *The Use of Pleasure* Foucault characterizes ancient dietetics as one of three arts of conducting the self.⁵⁶⁶ In contrast to our contemporary understanding of dieting, which is primarily concerned with diet (alimentation) and weight-loss, ancient dietetics encompassed not only alimentary concerns, but other somatic (such as physical exercise and sexual activity) and environmental (such as weather) factors. In Foucault's view it "characterized the way in which one managed one's existence."⁵⁶⁷ As such, it forms an aspect of the stylization of one's life (*bios*) and the aesthetics of existence.⁵⁶⁸ Dietetics can therefore be described as one possible mode – encompassing a range of activities or practices – of *rappport à soi* (which in its ancient context connotes a broader concern for the body than limited to the regulation of alimentation). Dietetics delimits the body as the general ethical material (which is divided into more specific focal sites) of concern and denotes a specific reason for that concern (for example, the desire to maintain bodily health, to develop muscle, to meet ideals of beauty and gender). It encompasses a range of activities that work upon the body, bringing it to reflect the principle or ideal underlying that concern and at the same time forming a particular kind of subject that refers to both the principle and the broader context in which the relation to self is established.

As I noted in Chapter Four, dietetic practices operate in a similar way to other practices of the self, inscribing in the subject certain principles for behaviour which, in contrast to a universal rule-based ethics, prepares the subject to face a multitude of situations. As we have seen, the value of this idea is that it allows Foucault to articulate how the subject's *rappport à soi* can act as the primary point of reference for ethics. Techniques of the self enable the subjectivation of discourse. The activities of the dietetic regimen inscribe the individual with the potential and capacities to face other situations.⁵⁶⁹ Like Foucault's analysis of ancient *hupomnemata* and the activities of self-writing, dietetic practices effectively 'embody' the principles and rules that overarch those activities. This brings into question again the idea that such techniques

⁵⁶⁶ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 251.

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid., 101.

⁵⁶⁸ As Foucault puts it, "the physical regimen ought to accord with the principle of a general aesthetics of existence in which the equilibrium of the body was one of the conditions of the proper hierarchy of the soul." (Ibid., 104.)

⁵⁶⁹ Dietetics – as an overarching 'technique of existence' – "created the possibility of forming oneself as a subject in control of his conduct that is, the possibility of making oneself like the doctor treating sickness, the pilot steering between the rocks, or the statesman governing the city—a skillful and prudent guide of himself, one who had a sense of the right time and the right measure." (Ibid., 138-9.)

of the self *shape* the subjective dimension. Here my concern is more with the implications of this idea for the political possibilities of Foucault's ethics.

That the subjective dimension – or 'capacity' – can be shaped by techniques of the self presents both political possibilities and theoretical problems. This contradiction arises primarily in the idea that the subjective dimension can be cultivated and deployed to contradictory ends. On one hand, such practices may provide the subject with positive opportunities for self-constitution and control, and ultimately be deployed in resisting regimes of power. On the other hand, this dimension and the skills these capacities develop may be captured and manipulated by mechanisms of power, effectively becoming instruments in the subjection and normalisation of individuals. As feminist scholars (in particular) have argued, some aesthetic practices – those of dietetic regimen being the prime example – may appear to present the potential for developing skills or capacities that can be used to resist power, yet contribute to the very disciplining and subjection of individuals.

As such, Foucault's analysis of dietetic regimen does not appear to move very far beyond the account of docile bodies in *Discipline and Punish*. As Heyes points out, the minute, habitual and overt activities of modern dieting practices are very similar to Foucault's concept of the 'disciplines.' These are the methods of meticulous control that ensure the subjection of the body's forces and impose upon them a "relation of docility-utility."⁵⁷⁰ The activities involved in dieting – and beauty regimes more broadly – point to the ever more pervasive, minute hold over women's (and men's) bodies. This is ever more effective because it is women (and men) who adopt responsibility for the rationalisation and performance of those activities. Under this reading, any purportedly 'positive' aspects of the self-discipline essential to dieting and beauty regimes mask the operation and ever deepening embodiment of disciplinary and normalising mechanisms.

As Bartky points out however, the story is more complicated than this: "Whatever its ultimate effect, discipline can provide the individual upon whom it is imposed with a sense of mastery as well as a secure sense of identity. There is a certain contradiction here: While its imposition may promote a larger disempowerment, discipline may bring with it a certain development of a person's

⁵⁷⁰ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 137.

powers.”⁵⁷¹ It is in the apparent paradox between an individual’s increased self-determination and the corollary increase in self-discipline that “pockets of resistance” might arise.⁵⁷² But it is also the *discourses* surrounding various forms of practices of the self that are vulnerable to manipulation. Within the context of dieting, for example, such practices are carried out in reference to (sometimes competing) discourses about health, nutrition, beauty and ideal forms of subjectivity. The point that feminist scholars such as Heyes have made is that what are effectively *disciplinary* techniques that *normalise* individuals are legitimised through such discourses under the *aegis* of ‘self-care.’⁵⁷³

The issue at stake in this analysis is whether, and if so to what extent, techniques of the self can really be said to enable resistance against power. That is, although techniques of the self can and do produce docile bodies, Foucault’s account of ancient practices must be pressed further to show that such processes also extend bodies’ skills and capacities, often in a positive way. The problem, as outlined in Chapters One and Three, is that these objectives are often seen to be contradictory and therefore incompatible. What should be noted, however, is that the possible co-opting of techniques of the self does not preclude their political potential. The paradox, as Bartky observes, is that the self-discipline required by dieting practices can actually foster positive capacities that can be used toward genuine self-care. Indeed, Heyes suggests that disciplinary practices enacted under the *aegis* of care of the self might simultaneously cultivate docile bodies *and* constitute practices of freedom.⁵⁷⁴ What should be pointed out is that to take the view that dieting regimes are necessarily subjecting and repressive implies taking the subsequent view that such regimes therefore need only to be rejected. This is in turn to think that the only politically meaningful choice lies in liberating oneself from those regimes.⁵⁷⁵ Thus we return to the familiar problem of locating external sources of resistance to these regimes.

⁵⁷¹ Bartky, “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power,” 77.

⁵⁷² *Ibid.*, 81.

⁵⁷³ Heyes argues that weight-loss dieting (‘dieting’ for short) is “a process of working on the self, marketed and sold to women with particular resonance, that cleverly deploys the discourse of self-care feminists have long encouraged.” (*Self-Transformations*, 63.)

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁵⁷⁵ Heyes notes: “I was struck by its [feminist assessments of dieting practices] characterization of weight-loss dieting as part of a relentlessly repressive process of subjection. If we give it up, we will be liberated. To see why dieting might also be enabling—even if often deceptively so—requires a more detailed account of the *processes* it entails. Almost no feminists, however, catalogue and theorize the expanded capabilities that dieting can generate, or the forms of

Yet this does not address the question about whether techniques of the self are necessarily political. Indeed, the political value of practices that fall under the heading of ‘self-care’ – especially those associated with practices involved in dieting and beauty regimes – might be considered questionable, not least because they are traditionally ‘feminine’ and ‘private’ activities. But this is precisely the sort of idea that Foucault’s work should be used to dispel. Views that see such practices as belonging to the realm of the ‘private,’ and therefore as politically irrelevant, do more damage than any apparently negative implications that arise from characterising these practices in public and political terms. Moreover the practices of aesthetic self-stylisation or self-care can in fact enable greater political and civic participation. As McGushin notes, dietetics is one possible field of action concerned with self-mastery that enables participation in political life and the government of others.⁵⁷⁶ Similarly, Heyes argues that: “Care of the self is not an indulgence or a distraction from the affairs of the polis, but rather a necessary condition of effective citizenship and relationships. We owe it to ourselves and others to constitute ourselves as ethical agents through asketic practices.”⁵⁷⁷

The key lies in understanding the political potential of such techniques not in their practice as such, but in the possibility of exercising these techniques in such a way that they challenge the discursive and epistemological frameworks in which they are carried out. Heyes notes for example that her own experience of dieting techniques “embodied the paradox that Foucault highlighted so well: that normalizing disciplinary practices are also enabling of new skills and capacities that may exceed the framing of the original activity.”⁵⁷⁸ What is both theoretically and politically significant about this analysis is that the subject can participate in such practices in a *critical* way. The subject can adopt a critical relation to the ideals, assumptions and discourses that gave them their initial meaning and purpose. Indeed this may mean no more than becoming aware of the contingency of these discursive and epistemological

practical training it embodies. We are thus not well placed to understand in turn how those capacities and skills are co-opted back into the service of weight loss, instead of offering a way to care for the self that might constitute a form of freedom.” (Ibid.,67)

⁵⁷⁶ McGushin, *Foucault’s Askēsis*, 35.

⁵⁷⁷ Heyes, *Self-Transformations*, 80.

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid., 67. She goes on: “On the one hand, deliberately losing weight by controlling diet involves the self-construction of a docile body through attention to the minutest detail. On the other hand, becoming aware of exactly how and what one eats and drinks, realizing that changing old patterns can have embodied effects, or setting a goal and moving toward it, are all enabling acts of self-transformation.”

conditions. But this is precisely what Foucault sets out to do. In the end, there is only so much someone with Foucault's philosophical commitments can offer modern audiences. If he is unwilling to prescribe certain actions and behaviour, or to make judgements about what constitutes 'good' and 'bad' arrangements of power relations, then he is limited to showing the ways in which our assumptions, practices, and ways of understanding ourselves hinge upon specific discourses and *épistémès*. What is useful about Foucault's adoption of ancient practices of the self is that his analysis presents a starting point for analysing modern practices, thereby enabling a critical analysis of their underlying 'universals.' In this way, techniques of the self that are critically practiced enable one avenue of calling into question the very epistemological frameworks and discourses that frame one's life and subjectivity.

Conclusion

As we have seen, Foucault turns to ancient practices of the self in order to found the groundwork for a new politics. The idea of an ethic and politics of the self for Foucault represents the only meaningful response to the contingency of our modes of self-understanding revealed through his genealogy of the subject. What he wants out of ancient practices is both a model and a point of departure for how we might found and elaborate that politics. Indeed, the possibility of self-constitution for Foucault plays a central role in his very idea of politics and the political field.

In his description of the 'essay' of philosophical ascesis, Foucault links intellectual enquiry with both aesthetic self-transformation and the 'right' to question authority characteristic of the ethical attitude. Indeed, this linkage gives further insight into what Foucault thinks this 'right' entails. It appears initially as a capacity that is enabled and cultivated through the reflection and questioning of one's own thought: as simply the capacity for critical thinking. Particularly, it requires a calling into question of one's own thought and beliefs by questioning their dependence upon broader discourses and epistemological frameworks. As we see in Chapter Six, however, this is also a relational right: a right that emerges from the fact of being in relation to (or, put another way, as being subject to) given technologies and power. Foucault thinks that public intellectuals or philosophers bear a particular responsibility to help others cultivate that critical capacity. Foucault views *himself* as bearing such a responsibility, which helps to understand the role that his work is supposed to serve. It is precisely to assist individuals by conducting the groundwork that will enable them to think

differently. Moreover, he sees them as bearing a public responsibility to question governments and institutions on their claims to truth.

Significantly, these descriptions of the public duties of philosophy contribute not only to our understanding of how Foucault conceived his own project, but how he conceived of ‘resistance’ and the critique of power more broadly. In pointing out that philosophy should not seek to prescribe the operation of power or technologies of government, Foucault provides a rejoinder to those critics who accuse him of failing to offer a real alternative view of the future.⁵⁷⁹ He sees his own role and responsibility not to prescribe or even provide a possible alternative model of society; it is, rather, precisely to call into question the relationship between authority and truth. In this way, the initial aim of the critical attitude is to thereby open up interstices between authority and its discourses in which alternative discourses and subjective practices might be carried out. Moreover, it is through this idea of *refusing* given discourses, epistemological structures and forms of government that resistance should be understood. (I return to this in Chapter Six.)

In examining the political implications of Foucault’s emphasis on aesthetic practices, I argued that the latter present a challenge to the usual alignment between the public and political spheres. As I argue further in the next chapter, this is complemented by ‘relations of power’ and corollary de-identification of political power from the state. The political field needs to be re-conceived as extending throughout the social field, wherever power relations come into play. In this way, aesthetic practices are by definition political, since they are involved in the subject’s self-constitution which occurs as part of the very constitution of the political field itself. (Foucault thus restores to aesthetic activities a concern with the *polis*, which in turn requires the de-emphasis on their Nietzschean elements.) As such, the political field presupposed by the ‘ethic of power’ presented here extends to include these aesthetic practices. More needs to be said, however, about how such a political field is to be understood. Not only does the description of self-stylisation as a political activity disrupt the traditional alignment of the political with the public, Foucault’s characterisation of power relations as coextensive with everyday social relations complicates the idea that political power is restricted to the public, political domain. This is not to say that there is no distinction between the public and private (this is a

significant ethical and political problem in itself, but which is beyond the scope of the discussion presented here), but that according to Foucault's analyses, the political pervades both sides of this apparent division.

Finally, I noted the complexity and inherent contradiction in the idea that the subjective dimension can be cultivated as a source of resistance to exercises of power. As feminist scholars have pointed out, this dimension can be developed under the *aegis* of care for the self or co-opted toward disciplining or normalising ends. This contradiction cannot be resolved. Indeed, resolving it would undermine Foucault's attempt to provide a more balanced account of the interaction between self-constituting practices and subjectivation [*assujettissement*].

⁵⁷⁹ For a discussion of this point, especially in relation to Habermas and critical theory, see Butler, "What is Critique?" especially 213-215.

Chapter Six: A politics of refusal?

Introduction

To enable modern individuals to develop different subjectivities and modes of being is the most important philosophical and political objective of Foucault's work. Indeed, he works from the premise that to constitute oneself in relation to the prevailing discourses and power formations of one's time is the cornerstone of political activity. In this final chapter I take this as my point of departure for examining the central facets of a Foucaultian politics. I describe a relational account of politics, according to which the concepts of 'freedom,' 'right' and 'resistance' are meaningful by virtue of their place within Foucault's idea of 'relations of power.' It is divided into three sections.

The first section describes the idea of a relational politics. This responds in part to the disassociation of political power that results from the analytics of governmentality. That latter, as we have seen, views governmental power (the shaping or determination of a person's behaviour or actions, broadly put) as a widespread social phenomenon. As a consequence, I have argued (especially when read in conjunction with Foucault's account of relations of power), standard ways of understanding politics and the political field need to be reconceived. A relational politics, I suggest, responds to this need. The potential for the political field emerges contemporaneously and co-extensively with power relations. As such, in line with my arguments in Chapter Four, this further disrupts the idea that 'private' activities and practices should not, or cannot, enter into the political field. Indeed, the coherency of Foucault's account depends on the abandonment of the correlation between the public and political domains.

In developing an alternative approach to politics, I point to the discursive field as the primary site of political contestation. Discourse, I suggest, marks the site of interplay between the epistemological frameworks and structures of power of a given society. This is essential to understanding the operation and significance of the critical attitude, since it is irruptions in the discursive field that open the interstices within which individuals can promote new forms of subjectivity. In doing so, I return briefly

to Arendt's concept of power in order to clarify the role of discourse as a condition of politics. Finally, I point to the way in which the relational nature of politics enables Foucault to conceive of a concept of 'right' that remains consistent with his broader project and philosophical commitments.

In section two, I turn to Foucault's analyses of *parrēsia*, and examine the role of 'frank discourse' in regards to politics. While the theme of *parrēsia* is central to Foucault's final two years of lectures at the Collège de France, my aim is not to provide a comprehensive analysis of this theme as it appears in these lectures. Rather, I focus on the political implications of this theme by drawing out its conceptual relationship with the critical attitude. Specifically, I argue that in its political form, *parrēsia* should be understood as the actualisation of the critical attitude. That is, truthful discourse manifests the right to question authority on its relation to truth.

As we have seen, for Foucault the subject emerges as a constitutive element of the political field. If we understand the subject as a discursive phenomenon that emerges contemporaneously with relations of power and freedom, we can see how the subject's self-constituting practices are intimately connected with the critical work involved in challenging the given discourses and epistemological frames that govern subjects' self-understanding. Toward this end I examine in further detail the idea of the critical attitude and its relationship with aesthetic practices. Indeed, I introduced this point in Chapter Four, where I pointed to the way that even those practices vulnerable to normalisation can be practiced in a critical way. It is only by understanding the relationship between aesthetic self-formation and the critical attitude that the latter can be saved from an otherwise incontrovertible problem identified by Judith Butler. That is, that in questioning the epistemological and authoritarian foundations of supposed 'true discourses,' *parrēsia* requires the subject to suspend precisely that critical relation that the subject sought to adopt. The significance of this point lies not only in its consequences for the internal coherency of Foucault's work, but in its consequences for Foucault's critical and political contributions more broadly. This is because it speaks to the capacity to stand within the discourses of a given culture (and to draw upon its concepts, language, and traditions), and yet to call into question the very conditions of the emergence of this thought and critical stance.

Finally, I conclude the chapter by returning to the idea of 'resistance.' In understanding what Foucault means by 'resistance,' I argue that we should look to his

account of the ‘critical attitude’—the right to qualified refusal of given forms of government. This is not to say that resistance to power is limited to this refusal, but that the latter founds resistance. While it may still fail to meet certain normative criteria as presented in Chapter One, the idea of refusal as the founding form of resistance allows a meaningful conception of the latter that remains coherent with Foucault’s broader project. This contributes to the ethic of power a concept of resistance not dependent on *a priori* normative frameworks, and which is instead based on the subject’s *rapport à soi*.

A relational politics? Rights and the political field

As discussed in Chapter Two, Foucault’s analysis of governmentality de-couples political power from the state. As such, Foucault’s work disrupts the traditional distinction between the public and private spheres normally assumed by the statist model. The analytics of governmentality recognizes that the private sphere does not demarcate a space free from state and government intervention, but rather that this space is itself delimited by state regulation and invested by state power.⁵⁸⁰ As Lemke points out, the analytics of governmentality “conceives of the state as an instrument and effect of political strategies that define the external borders between the public and the private and the state and civil society.”⁵⁸¹ In revealing ‘civil society’ and ‘the state’ as primarily discursive phenomena Foucault requires us to re-think the conditions of political activity.

This has two related consequences for the broader picture of politics at issue here. First, as noted in Chapter Two, by bringing these ideas into question, Foucault wants to halt any recourse to ‘civil society’ as a common source of resistance based on its apparent opposition to the state. Civil society, he argues, “is not an historical-natural given which functions in some way as both the foundation of and source of opposition to the state and political institutions.”⁵⁸² Second, it signifies the need for a complete overhaul of the traditional division between the private and public spheres, and the latter’s correlation with the politics. In turn, this requires a re-formulation of the very idea of political action and activity. This is because concepts such as the state and civil society have set the discursive frameworks and conditions within which

⁵⁸⁰ See Lemke, *Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique*, 34.

⁵⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵⁸² Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 297.

political activity is understood and made meaningful. The forms of knowledge and types of power peculiar to specific governmental institutions “constitute the parameters of our political thought and action.”⁵⁸³ By placing the conceptual foundation of these institutions in question, Foucault opens the possibility for alternative conceptions of political action. As Behrent notes, Foucault shifts from a theoretical anti-statism involving the claim that the state be abandoned as the model for *understanding* power to the belief that the state should cease to be the primary focus of political *engagement*.⁵⁸⁴

In contrast, then, what would a relational approach to politics entail? Initially we should understand politics to be founded on power relations. In de-coupling political power from the state, and by undermining the very concept of the state itself, Foucault effectively disrupts the traditional division between the public and private spheres. The political field becomes co-extensive with the social field, and politics emerges wherever power is exercised. Considering the ubiquity of power under Foucault’s account, politics becomes a much broader and widespread idea, requiring a re-thinking of the nature of political activity.

Aesthetic activities thereby become fundamentally linked to Foucault’s idea of politics. This is because, as I have already argued, subjects emerge as part of the network of power relations and therefore as *part* of the very field of politics. If relations of power demarcate the extension of the political field, Foucault’s account of the subject as founded on *rapport à soi* is posited as a constitutive element of the political field itself. Recalling the account provided in Chapter Three, the subject emerges *within* networks of power relations. The reflexive relationship with self arises through the ‘folding-back’ of these originary relations (to make use of Deleuze and Butler’s descriptions). The activities and practices that engage or modify *rapport à soi* (and the subjective dimension that emerges) are by default political. At the very least they have political implications because they form a constitutive element of the political field itself. As such, these activities provide a point of entry for thinking about alternative models for political engagement.

In identifying the political field so closely with relations of power, however, Foucault runs the risk of ‘de-politicising’ power. That is, in positing power relations as

⁵⁸³ Bernauer, *Michel Foucault’s Force of Flight: Toward an Ethics of Thought* (London: Humanities Press International, 1990), 122.

⁵⁸⁴ Behrent, “Liberalism without Humanism,” 545.

a necessary and irreducible feature of everyday social relations, Foucault risks diminishing the political significance of exercises of power. Furthermore Foucault might be accused – as Rorty does – of undermining politics for even suggesting that aesthetic activities have political implications. For Rorty, as we have seen, this is problematic because the values he ascribes to aesthetics cannot be reflected in liberal institutions. Part of the danger lies in extending apparently private and individualistic values into the public domain, which would give them political (and moral) legitimacy that diminishes otherwise ‘real’ political issues. If everything is political, political activity would seem to lose its critical and ethical force. As I pointed out at the end of Chapter Five, this view tends toward the idea that conceiving aesthetic activities as part of the political field undermines politics, rather than seeing it as *enriching* our understanding of politics.

In response to Rorty at least we can point out that Foucault would not think that our ethics *should* be founded in such liberal institutions. Indeed, it is clear that Foucault does not think that we should simply include aesthetic practices of self-stylisation as part of standing conceptions of political activity. What the analytics of governmentality contributes is an avenue by which to re-conceive purportedly mundane and non-political practices and forms of subjectivation as important objects for political analysis.⁵⁸⁵ (Casting the purportedly private, feminine activities associated with dieting and beauty in explicitly political terms is a prime example.) Ancient ethics and aesthetic practices for Foucault represent the pivotal point around which to re-think the relationship between ethics and politics. By placing *rapport à soi* at the centre of his idea of ethics, Foucault thereby places the relationship with oneself and its associated practices as inextricably concerned with politics. Beginning with a critical ontology of the modern subject, Foucault encourages us to adopt a critical relation to given frameworks of interpretation, and thus to recognise that given forms of self-understanding are products of historical technologies of power.

To get at that what this means, let us turn first to the relationship between discourse and subjectivation [*assujettissement*]. In “The Order of Discourse,” Foucault’s inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, he describes discourse in terms of its exclusory effects; that is, the way that the production of discourse is manipulated and deployed as a mechanism of power, in order to exclude and render silent

⁵⁸⁵ Lemke, *Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique*, 85.

alternative discourses.⁵⁸⁶ His *Birth of the Clinic* and *History of Madness* had already demonstrated Foucault's concern with the ways in which various historical formations of power have used discourse in this way. Discourses, for Foucault, represent the way that thought is organised so as to produce certain categories of understanding. *The History of Madness* showed how the history of madness – whether conceived in legal, medical or social terms – is itself a construct, determined as part of a particular discourse and particular structure of power. Discourses are, as Jean Khalfa puts it in his introduction to this text, “historical constructions of meaning.”⁵⁸⁷ As such, they represent the particular historical arrangements of power that determine intelligibility and experience.

In this way, Foucault had already laid the groundwork for his later descriptions of discourse as a site of contestation. In “The Order of Discourse,” he argues that “discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized.”⁵⁸⁸ The point that Foucault is making is that it is not enough to see discourse as merely representative or symptomatic of a particular historical formation of power; discourses feed into and support these formations. It is precisely because of the way that they can support or disrupt formations of power – whether they are institutions, political parties, social movements and so forth – that discourse is itself invested with force.

Central to a Foucaultian politics, I argue, should be the idea that the discursive field marks the site of interplay between the epistemological frameworks and the networks of power of a given society. Put another way, discourse mediates between epistemologies and structures of power. As such, discourse is itself a site of contestation. It marks a “strategic field [*un champ stratégique*].”⁵⁸⁹ Foucault describes discourse further as both a site and instrument of confrontation.⁵⁹⁰ Under this reading, it is at the level of discourse that politics and political activity occurs. It is at the level of discourse that epistemological structures come under fire. Yet, if discourse is “a

⁵⁸⁶ See Foucault, “The Order of Discourse.”

⁵⁸⁷ Jean Khalfa, “Introduction” in *The History of Madness*, ed. Jean Khalfa, trans. Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa (London: Routledge, 2009), xiv.

⁵⁸⁸ Foucault, “The Order of Discourse,” 52-53.

⁵⁸⁹ Foucault, “*Le discours ne doit pas être pris comme...*” in *Dits et Écrits II*, 123 [all translations are mine].

⁵⁹⁰ Foucault, “*Le discours*,” 123.

weapon of power, of control, of subjection [*assujettissement*],”⁵⁹¹ then it can also be used as a countervailing force. Discourse is therefore simultaneously a site and instrument of resistance. In this way, political activity should be defined primarily in discursive terms. Foucault clearly posits discourse as the primary site of political contestation. It is within this framework, then, that *parrēsia* and the critical attitude take on such political significance, as we see further below.

Before moving on it is worth considering this discursive aspect of politics in light of Hannah Arendt’s concept of ‘disclosure.’ In *The Human Condition*, as we have seen, Arendt defines ‘power’ as collective action which both emerges within and constitutes the political realm that arises when people are in community with one another. The possibility of this community or ‘togetherness,’ however, turns upon what Arendt refers to as disclosure: the revelation of the individual identity and uniqueness of each person within that community.⁵⁹² Significantly, it is the qualities of speech and action that enable this disclosure. “This revelatory quality of speech and action,” Arendt notes, “comes to the fore when people are *with* others and neither for nor against them—that is, in sheer human togetherness.”⁵⁹³ Speech and action are the modes by which men *qua* men appear to each other in their unique distinctness.⁵⁹⁴ For Arendt, speech is particularly significant because it is what gives meaning to human action (in Arendt’s specific use of the term). That is, ‘deed’ is only disclosed as ‘action’ by ‘the word,’ and action “becomes relevant only through the actor, announcing what he does, has done, and intends to do.”⁵⁹⁵ What should be noted here is that speech is thus a condition of possibility of community, and therefore of the possibility of power.

Despite the differences between Foucault and Arendt’s concepts of power, they both view speech or discourse as *conditions* of politics. For Foucault, discourse forms a primary site and instrument of political activity. As we have seen, in association with

⁵⁹¹ Foucault, “*Le discours*,” 124.

⁵⁹² According to Arendt: “In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice.” (*The Human Condition*, 179.) She goes on: “This disclosure of ‘who’ somebody is in contradistinction to ‘what’ somebody is—his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which he may display or hide—is implicit in everything somebody says and does.” (Ibid.)

⁵⁹³ Ibid., 180.

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid., 176.

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid., 179.

structures of power and epistemic frames, discourse also sets the terms by which actions, behaviour and experience are meaningful, including the terms of their political relevance. If we look to the specific forms of discourse that Foucault emphasises – most notably *parrēsia* and dialogue – it appears that the relationships underlying these forms of discourse set certain conditions by which speech is meaningful. Moreover, Foucault conceives of a certain ‘revelation’ of the subject – meaning the revelation of their *rapport à soi* and their relation to truth – as a condition of the relation between subjects whereby speech can be deployed to political ends.⁵⁹⁶ Yet despite these initial similarities, the roles of discourse or speech in Foucault and Arendt’s respective accounts of power and politics are different. For Arendt, speech is a condition of community, which is then a condition of power. For Foucault, however, the discursive field emerges co-extensively with structures of power and associated epistemic frames. While Foucault has the cursory idea that *parrēsia* ‘reveals’ subjects to one another, which consequently gives rise to the possibility of a certain space for politics and ethics, this is not a central, nor well-developed, idea. What is useful in comparing these accounts is the way that the differences in the roles of discourse or speech correlate to differences in their respective ideas about the nature of power. Particularly, the importance of the revelatory aspect of speech for the possibility of community, and therefore the power of collective action, points to Arendt’s more favourable view of consensual models of politics. While Foucault does not completely reject the importance or possibility of consensual models of political engagement, he does not think that consensuality should be an organising principle in the analysis of the phenomena of power relations.⁵⁹⁷

Returning to the idea of a relational politics, the characterisation of politics in relational terms offers an alternative means of founding meaningful notions of ‘right’ and ‘resistance.’ In Chapter Two I pointed out how a relational idea of freedom addresses Foucault’s otherwise problematic use of freedom as a field of possible actions. Similarly, a relational account of politics appears to enable the invocation of ‘rights’ while avoiding the internal inconsistencies that might otherwise arise (particularly in relation to Foucault’s rejection of humanist conceptions of right). The emphasis on relationality, as we have seen, arises partly from Foucault’s displacement

⁵⁹⁶ *Parrēsia* is ‘telling all’: it is “telling the truth without concealment, reserve, empty manner of speech, or rhetorical ornament which might encode or hide it.” (Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 10.)

⁵⁹⁷ Foucault, “Politics and Ethics: An Interview,” in *The Foucault Reader*, 379.

of the concepts of state and sovereignty as the defining features of political power. Consistent with this anti-statism, Foucault thinks that the institutional power to define relationships, behaviour and values according to law limits the possibility of multi-various relationships between human beings. He observes that “we live in a legal, social, and institutional world where the only relations possible are extremely few, extremely simplified, and extremely poor.”⁵⁹⁸ This is one manifestation of the more general problem of how the state and its institutions (not to mention religious and social institutions) define the limits and content of the private sphere. He argues furthermore that “We live in a relational world that institutions have considerably impoverished. Society and the institutions which frame it have limited the possibility of relationships because a rich relational world would be very complex to manage.”⁵⁹⁹ In contrast to critics who would have us believe that Foucault’s philosophy turns on an egoistic, if not solipsistic, approach to ethics and to politics, the fact of human relationality is in fact an underlying and explicit part of Foucault’s concept of the social. Indeed, in moving away from a statist model of power toward power *relations*, Foucault poses the possibility of a richer and more complex account of human relationships.

Of particular significance here is that Foucault thinks that a richer account of relationships would enable an alternative account of human rights. These would be dislocated from state and legal institutions and associated instead with relations between subjects. As such, they are de-identified from law: “a right, in its real effects, is much more linked to attitudes and patterns of behaviour than to legal formations.”⁶⁰⁰ Foucault’s point is that it is not enough for a new ‘right’ (he is referring particularly to gay rights and marriage equality) to be recognised and legitimised institutionally, where all this recognition means that this right must fit itself into existing moulds for behaviour and relationships. Rather, Foucault’s account requires that rights be conceived both independent from statist, legal, and formalised social institutions and without recourse to universalist conceptions of human being. In any case, it is clear that Foucault by no means dismisses the concept of ‘rights’ in its entirety, as scholars such as Habermas and Fraser have pointed out. Recalling this point from Chapter One, Foucault is often accused of invoking concepts of right, resistance and freedom

⁵⁹⁸ Foucault, “The Social Triumph of the Sexual Will” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 158.

⁵⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid., 157.

without admitting to the requisite normative framework that would make them meaningful. In conceiving rights in relational terms, however, Foucault would appear to escape from this charge. This model of right is very different from its meaning in liberal political theory – particularly in its de-identification from the individual – and appears far from an ethical universalism. Foucault instead conceives of rights as emerging from human relationships. As I argue further below, Foucault begins from the fact that human beings exist in relation to one another and then from the idea that these relations can be characterised in terms of power. He extrapolates from this the possibility of a relational conception of rights that recognises our common experience of being subjects of power. I return to this point shortly.

Thus Foucault does not dismiss then the concept of ‘rights,’ nor their key role in political and social change. Yet his model of right is fundamentally different from its usual meaning in modern liberal democracies, and from the idea of inalienable individual rights that some critics would have him adopt. Foucault avers: “Rather than arguing that rights are fundamental and natural to the individual, we should try to imagine and create a new relational right that permits all possible types of relations to exist and not be prevented, blocked, or annulled by impoverished relational institutions.”⁶⁰¹ Of critical importance for his broader project, a ‘relational right’ would thus emerge *within* a given society or network of power relations. As such, this concept of right is not founded a given concept of human nature, nor on fixed ideas of what is ‘normal.’⁶⁰² By positing a relationally defined concept of right, moreover, Foucault undermines the usual underlying structure of how rights are conceived; that is, the protection or delimiting of morally legitimatised action or space of action. As Lemke observes, in referring to a relational right, Foucault focuses more on shared or common experiences, whereby rights are conceived in more positive terms as the possibility of establishing a new form of life.⁶⁰³ (The concept of relational rights is thereby linked to the idea of aesthetic practices, as we see further below.) In this way the idea of relational rights is linked further with *rapport à soi* and the differential relations from which subjects emerge. Or as Lemke puts it, Foucault’s idea of right is founded on difference, not identity.⁶⁰⁴

⁶⁰¹ Ibid., 158.

⁶⁰² Lemke, *Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique*, 68.

⁶⁰³ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁴ Ibid.

Foucault's notion of right appears in even stronger terms in the following passage:

There exists an international citizenry that has its rights, that has its duties, and that is committed to rise up against every abuse of power, no matter who the author, no matter who the victims. After all, we are all ruled, and as such, we are in solidarity. [...] Men's misfortune must never be the silent remnant of politics. It is the basis of an absolute right to rise up and address those who hold the power.⁶⁰⁵

We can see in this idea of rights not only an increasing emphasis on the concept of relationality itself, but the foundation of a common right to resistance. Two forms of relation can be identified here. First, the relation between subjects that places them in 'solidarity.' This, I suggest, is best described in terms of the relations between human beings as subjects of power. This includes the sense in which they are in relation by the fact of each subject's *rapport à soi*, which arise out of originary relations. Second, the relation denoted by *assujettissement*—the sense in which each subject is in relation to the dominant, heteronomous forces of subjectivation. 'Solidarity' thus refers to the common experience of 'being ruled': of *assujettissement*.

Yet given Foucault's various critiques of humanism, such a strong claim to an 'absolute right' is curious. Although it goes some way in addressing the apparent lack of concern Foucault feels for the experiences of oppression and power, it complicates the idea of 'relational' rights. For one thing, Foucault's claim that a right to resist power is 'absolute' appears to undermine its relational nature, and appears inconsistent with Foucault's aversion to ethical universality. Even if such a shift would make Foucault more acceptable within certain schools of ethics, it would undermine the idea of a relational politics as suggested here.

Furthermore Foucault's characterisation of this right as one opposed to 'those who hold the power' appears inconsistent with his view that power cannot be held, let alone possessed by one side over and against another. Of course, the context of this passage might mitigate these criticisms, as this was made within a public context

⁶⁰⁵ Excerpt from a press conference at which Foucault spoke in Geneva in 1981. Originally published in *Libération*, June 30, 1984, not long after Foucault's death. Quoted in Didier Eribon, "We Are All Ruled," in *Michel Foucault*, 279. The press conference at which Foucault spoke these words was one of several activities, in which Foucault participated, along with

rather than an academic one. Foucault certainly defends his right to make use of certain terms, regardless of their being subject to critical appraisal. Nevertheless, in describing solidarity in this way, Foucault opens himself to a charge that has been frequently levelled at certain tenets of feminism. The problem with making an address to power on the basis of an apparent shared experience of ‘being ruled,’ is that one runs the risk of homogenising a range of experiences of oppression and subjectivation.

Foucault’s claim to human solidarity is nevertheless intriguing. Indeed it even appears to place him just a little closer to Arendt on the issue of a consensual model of power.⁶⁰⁶ But what is especially significant about this passage is what it might say about the possibility of a Foucaultian notion of common humanity, through the idea of human solidarity. This at first appears to be in stark contrast to the dismissal of human nature and ‘man’ outlined Chapters Two and Three. (Although as noted in those chapters, this was more a rejection of a certain philosophical idea of the subject as the epistemological condition of objective knowledge.) Both the claims to human solidarity and to absolute rights appear to have recourse to a universal conception of human nature.

But this apparent contradiction between a claim to ‘absolute’ rights and Foucault’s problem with universality arises partly out of a misunderstanding of the role of such rights within Foucault’s thought. The idea that rights are inherently universal is usually aligned with the related view that the concepts of human nature with which these rights are linked are also universal. Foucault rejects universality on both fronts. Yet his claim to relational rights is compatible with the minimalist form of universality I outlined in Chapter Four. That is, a form of universality which responds to the particularity of Foucault’s account of an historically and culturally-specific conception of human being. Along a slightly different line, Patton argues that by understanding rights as “historical and contingent features of particular forms of social life,” the apparent contradiction between the universality implied by a claim to rights and Foucault’s explicit rejection of ethical universality can be resolved.⁶⁰⁷ Similarly,

Sartre, lobbying for an increase in the number of refugees – ‘boat people’ – accepted into France. (See *Ibid.*, 278-279.)

⁶⁰⁶ On this point I disagree with Amy Allen, who suggests that such solidarity is impossible if taken within a strict Foucaultian interpretation of strategic power relations. (See Allen, “Power, Subjectivity and Agency,” 143.)

⁶⁰⁷ Paul Patton, “Foucault, Critique and Rights” in *Critique Today: Challenges of Contemporary Critical Theory*, eds. Robert Sinnerbrink et. al. (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill), 269.

Lemke suggests that this tension “disappears once we understand rights as integral parts of and contingent features of power relations, as delimited and defined by social institutions and collective life forms.”⁶⁰⁸ Indeed the concept of relationally defined rights presents certain critical advantages. Positing rights as relationally defined renders them specifically historical phenomena. As such, as Lemke and Patton note, different rights may emerge, transform, or fade as power relations change.⁶⁰⁹ This lends to political and critical theory a greater capacity for flexibility and responsiveness to social and cultural changes.

It is precisely in the idea of relationality, and the corollary idea of relational rights, that this possibility is founded. As Paul Veyne suggests, “Without being too insistent about it, he ended up with a general conception of the human condition, the freedom with which it could react to things, and also its finite nature.”⁶¹⁰ This is best understood through the idea of a relational politics. As I have demonstrated, there are three key features to this account. First, the potential for the political field to emerge extends throughout the social sphere, co-extensive with power relations. In this way, Foucault disrupts the usual alignment between the public and political spheres. Second, discourse constitutes the primary site and instrument of political contestation. Thus while power relations delineate the extension of the political field, it is at the level of discourse that political activity occurs. Third, the relational nature of the political field establishes the foundation of an alternative conception of ‘rights’ compatible with Foucault’s broader project. What needs to be pressed further is the relation of discourse to the subject’s self-constitution, and how it is that the practices defined and made meaningful by given discourses are simultaneously able to pose a challenge to the latter.

The politics of the critical attitude

The geneo-critical aspect of Foucault’s work, as I have presented it here, has two overarching objectives. First, to conduct the preliminary genealogical analyses required to reveal the historical specificity of the epistemological and discursive frameworks through which we understand ourselves as subjects. Second, to give critical impetus to ‘the work of freedom.’ Together, these objectives can be seen as

⁶⁰⁸ Lemke, *Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique*, 68.

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid., 68-69.

⁶¹⁰ Veyne, *Foucault*, 2.

two facets of the same project: to conceive political activity as work (transformative, creative, or emancipatory) carried out upon oneself *through* a critically practiced challenge to these frameworks of understanding. My purpose here is to evaluate the success of this project. In order to achieve this, I turn first to the linkages between the critical attitude and Foucault's analyses of *parrēsia*, which demonstrate the extent to which political activity should be conceived in discursive terms. Subsequently I return briefly to aesthetic practices in order to explicate the political role of the critical attitude. Before turning to these points, I note very briefly the key elements of the idea of critique against which Foucault juxtaposes his own account.

Before returning to Foucault's own idea of the critical attitude, we should recall momentarily the account of critique that he rejected (referred to briefly in Chapter Two). As Lemke notes, the idea of critique Foucault questions in "The Order of Discourse" is linked with the juridico-discursive model of power, best characterised by the requirement of *a priori*, rational standards of evaluation.⁶¹¹ As such, it takes on the negative, repressive character of the juridico-discursive model. It is structured by an asymmetrical relation of power, where those conducting the critique assume a knowledge and an authority which sets them apart from its object. In this way, the relation characteristic of critique actually mirrors the structure of juridico-discursive power. Like the latter, it is seen to operate over and against its object. As Lemke notes, it is this opposition that opens the "fundamental distance between the practice of critique and its object that allows for the critical stance."⁶¹² More broadly, the structure, conditions, and limits of critique are themselves already delimited and defined by a given historical technology of power. Within the context of Foucault's analysis of liberalism, this idea of critique fails again because it is posed as a transcendent, objective form of social and political analysis, yet the norms on which it is predicated – such as 'civil society' and 'freedom' – are part of the liberal technology of government.

Yet this poses the question, as noted in Chapter Two, about the real critical and political possibilities of Foucault's alternative: if critique must be conducted from within the framework it seeks to place in question, how can its integrity be guaranteed? As we have seen, Foucault hesitates at using a normative framework of

⁶¹¹ Lemke, *Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique*, 58. Lemke provides a useful analysis of the four components – of dispersion, deficit, dependency, and distance – of critique under the juridico-discursive model. (Ibid., especially 57-60.)

evaluation. On one hand, his critical trademark is to place in question the naturalness and universality of given norms, values and concepts by drawing out their socio-historical conditions. The archaeo-genealogical aspect of this approach is to reveal how particular discursive practices engender specific rules for how concepts and theories are formed. As Jean Khalfa observes at the end of his introduction to *The History of Madness*, much of Foucault's later work is concerned with the question of explaining how it is possible for thought to "explain the freedom within which it operates."⁶¹³ Khalfa's point, however, is that in studying the history of systems of thought, thought must examine the conditions of its own emergence, which precludes the possibility of detaching itself from those conditions. Yet Foucault relies on being able to deploy the norms, values and concepts of a given society as part of the very critical framework through which to investigate that society. In this way, as Lemke points out, "norms themselves are part of the historical field under investigation and not outside it; they are less the measure or starting point than an object of analysis and the outcome of a conflict."⁶¹⁴ Norms are "constituted in struggles, are a part of them and a stake in them."⁶¹⁵ For some scholars, as noted earlier, this not only precludes the possibility of transcendent critique, it thereby undermines its political potential for conceiving new forms of subjectivity.⁶¹⁶

Indeed, the critical attitude is supposed to present the next step in developing and crystallising the political possibilities of the archaeo-genealogical revelation. It is supposed to present the means of deploying these revelations to confront, if not undermine, the historical conditions of particular subjectivities. As we have seen, the initial form of this confrontation is placing into question the relation of authority to truth, the impetus for which stems from the desire to not be governed *like that*. That is, questioning the authority claimed by those who purport to have access to 'the truth,' or, conversely, by questioning claims to knowledge on the basis of authority. If, as I have argued it should be, the political field is characterised primarily in discursive

⁶¹² Ibid., 59.

⁶¹³ Khalfa, "Introduction," xxv.

⁶¹⁴ Lemke, *Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique*, 24.

⁶¹⁵ Ibid.

⁶¹⁶ Lemke, conversely, goes as far as to suggest that critique may actually enable a richer account of norms. By displacing the concept of critique that requires normative justification, Foucault enables the conception of an 'experimental and transformative' critique. However, this does not preclude the possibility of a recourse to normative criteria or norms. Rather, this idea of critique enables a "new normative grammar that explores alternative forms of rights and different modes of subjectivity." (Ibid., 74-75.)

terms, critique would appear as the primary form of political activity. To fully understand this point, we should turn to Foucault's formulation of *parrēsia*. This is because the use of *parrēsia* signifies the adoption of an attitude of critique in regard to the overarching discourses to which the subject speaks.

Indeed it is the *function* of *parrēsia* that Foucault wants to re-introduce into politics. Truthful discourse causes a rupture in the given discursive field: it both presents a challenge to a given discourse and threatens the power arrangement with which the discursive field is aligned. He describes this rupture as the "necessary, indispensable, and fragile caesura that true discourse cannot fail to introduce into a democracy which both makes this discourse possible and constantly threatens it."⁶¹⁷ Foucault expressly states the need for the critical function of *parrēsia* in our own time; he poses the caesura introduced by true discourse as a necessary intervention in the usual ways of conceiving the operation of power and the nature of political action.⁶¹⁸ Indeed, in conceiving *parrēsia* as an essential element of the latter, Foucault thinks that we can re-introduce to modern politics certain ideas about the practice of the political game lost in a shift to 'the political' over 'politics.' These are, Foucault suggests, the idea of the political game as "a field of experience with its rules and normativity, of the political game as experience inasmuch as it is indexed to truth-telling and involves a certain relationship to oneself and to others."⁶¹⁹ As I have already argued, Foucault wants to introduce the self-constitution of the subject (through the concepts of *rapport à soi* and its associated fields of experience) as a significant and constitutive part of the political field itself.

To get at one aspect of what Foucault might mean here, we can look to the relationships he thinks are characteristic of dialogue and polemics. Most importantly, Foucault posits the possibility of a form of critique as a 'right' of the discursive field more generally. In accounting for his dislike of polemics, Foucault describes the ideal discursive relationship as one where the speaker and interlocutor are each bound by certain rules. Certain discursive conditions emerge in the relationship delimited by speaker and interlocutor: "In the serious play of questions and answers, in the work of

⁶¹⁷ Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, 184.

⁶¹⁸ "Well, in a time like ours, when we are so fond of posing the problems of democracy in terms of the distribution of power, of the autonomy of each in the exercise of power, in terms of transparency and opacity, and of the relation between civil society and the State, I think it may be a good idea to recall this old question [of the caesura that true discourse introduces into democracy]." (Ibid.)

reciprocal elucidation, the rights of each person are in some sense immanent in the discussion.”⁶²⁰ In dialogue, the person who answers questions posed to her is bound to the total content of her speech, and is committed to being questioned by the other person.⁶²¹ To ask questions is itself a right, according to Foucault’s account. This is where the right to critique emerges: “The person asking the questions is merely exercising the right that has been given to him: to remain unconvinced, to perceive a contradiction, to require more information, to emphasize different postulates, to point out faulty reasoning, and so on.”⁶²² In entering the dialogue, each participant implicitly agrees to these conditions, and to maintain the rights of the other person. Foucault states: “each of the two partners takes pains to use only the rights given him by the other person and by the accepted form of the dialogue.”⁶²³ Significantly, Foucault poses the conditions of such dialogue as part of a broader ethical concern: “a whole morality is at stake, the morality that concerns the search for truth and the relation to the other.”⁶²⁴

If we turn for a moment to *parrēsia*, we can see that the use of the latter similarly has certain relational conditions. *Parrēsia* requires that the subject first provide an account of their relation to truth, signified by the degree of congruence between their *bios* and *logos*.⁶²⁵ Similarly, the interlocutor discloses the relationship between her *bios* and *logos* by giving an account of herself.⁶²⁶ Indeed, Foucault argues that the relationship between the speaker and interlocutor is itself a condition of *parrēsia*, and which is put at risk through the speaker’s use of truthful discourse.⁶²⁷ As

⁶¹⁹ Ibid., 159.

⁶²⁰ Foucault, “Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations,” 111.

⁶²¹ Ibid., 111-112.

⁶²² Ibid., 111.

⁶²³ Ibid., 111-112.

⁶²⁴ Ibid., 111.

⁶²⁵ Foucault points to *Laches* as an example, where Socrates’ capacity to use *parrēsia* is conditional upon this congruence. He states: “Socrates is able to use rational, ethically valuable, fine, and beautiful discourse; but unlike the sophist, he can use *parrēsia* and speak freely because what he says accords exactly with what he does. And so Socrates—who is truly free and courageous—can therefore function as a parrhesiastic figure.” (*Fearless Speech*, 101.)

⁶²⁶ As Foucault describes it, “On the interlocutor’s side, the *bios-logos* relation is disclosed when the interlocutor gives an account of his life, and its harmony is tested by contact with Socrates.” (Ibid.)

⁶²⁷ Foucault observes, for example, that “In a way, the parrhesiast always risks undermining that relationship which is the condition of possibility of his discourse.” (*The Courage of Truth*, 11.) In his analyses of *Alcibiades*, friendship is the condition of *parrēsia* as spiritual guidance, “which can only exist if there is friendship, and where the employment of truth in this spiritual guidance is precisely in danger of bringing into question and breaking the relationship of friendship which made this discourse of truth possible.” (Ibid., 11-12.) In the case of the

such, this relationship structures the field within which true discourse is spoken, and the conditions upon which it is meaningful. Taken within the context of the political field outlined above, the role of the discursive relationship in Foucault's thinking about ethics and politics becomes clear. If political activity occurs at the level of discourse, the terms by which discursive relationships are set will determine in part the limits of political activity.⁶²⁸

In contrast to his ideal view of dialogue we can turn then to his problem with polemics. In Foucault's view the polemicist assumes a position of authority, certain of the truth and legitimacy of their view.⁶²⁹ As such, they see an interlocutor not as a 'partner in truth,' but as an adversary; the relationship itself is adversarial.⁶³⁰ Thus the discursive game is not defined by dialogue, nor by a common search for truth, but by the polemicist's exclusion of the other person from the very possibility of dialogue. The objective, Foucault argues, is "to bring about the triumph of the just cause he has been manifestly upholding from the beginning. The polemicist relies on a legitimacy that his adversary is by definition denied."⁶³¹ It is precisely in the realm of politics that Foucault thinks that polemics is most dangerous.⁶³² The structure of polemics is essentially exclusory. Moreover, polemics marks a way of acting that precludes the possibility of new ideas, not to mention the possibility of the disruption or reversal of structures of power.⁶³³ Perhaps the most significant point that emerges from this analysis is that in discarding polemics as the primary mode of political discourse, Foucault wants precisely to undermine its exclusory nature. But he does not do this by assuming a homogenised 'we.' Indeed, it is in the tendency of polemic discourse to assume a homogenised and authoritative 'we' that its exclusory nature lies. Rather,

political adviser, the stakes are higher. Truthful speech addressed to the ruler poses the threat of violence to the parrhesiast: "*Parrhēsia* therefore not only puts the relationship between the person who speaks and the person to whom he addresses the truth at risk, but it may go so far as to put the very life of the person who speaks at risk, at least if his interlocutor has power over him and cannot bear being told the truth." (Ibid., 12.)

⁶²⁸ Of course, speech and political activities more generally are not limited to these inter-personal relationships. Public protest, for example, does not fit within this model. But through it Foucault does suggest how inter-personal discourses can be defined in more broadly political terms.

⁶²⁹ Foucault, "Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations," 112.

⁶³⁰ Ibid.

⁶³¹ Ibid.

⁶³² Foucault states: "Polemics defines alliances, recruits partisans, unites interests or opinions, represents a party; it establishes the other as an enemy, an upholder of opposed interests against which one must fight until the moment this enemy is defeated and either surrenders or disappears." (Ibid.)

⁶³³ Ibid., 112-113.

Foucault argues that any sense of a collective community or ‘we’ should emerge only as a *result* of specific problematizations.⁶³⁴

To further understand the extent to which the critical attitude takes a discursive form we should look to the similarities between the critical attitude and *parrēsia*. There are two points that should be noted. First, Foucault describes both *parrēsia* and critique as marking a mode of relation to the world. He states: “*Parrēsia* is not a skill; it is something which is harder to define. It is a stance, a way of being which is akin to virtue, a mode of action.”⁶³⁵ We have already seen how the critical attitude is a particular way of relating to the world, the adoption of a stance or position of critique. But Foucault also describes critique as “akin to virtue.”⁶³⁶ Considering Foucault’s views on traditional forms of morality, ‘virtue’ cannot be taken to refer to moral excellence, nor to a human quality or attribute. Rather, taking into account the sense of ‘stance’ or ‘attitude’ that *parrēsia* and critique share, ‘virtue’ should be understood as referring to a mode of relation. As Butler suggests, “virtue is not only a *way* of complying with or conforming to preestablished norms. It is, more radically, a critical relation to those norms, one which for Foucault, takes shape as a specific stylization of morality.”⁶³⁷ In this way, the operation of critique and *parrēsia* are bound with the subject’s *rapport à soi*. This is only emphasised by the similarity in description of *parrēsia* and critique as modes of relating to the world. *Parrēsia* is both a ‘stance’ and ‘way of being.’ It thus suggests both the adoption of an attitude or relation taken in regards to existing discourses, and a particular mode of *rapport à soi*. Similarly, the critical attitude is precisely that: a stance or attitude of critique taken toward given regimes of power and arts of government.

The second point is that Foucault characterises both *parrēsia* and critique as relations that introduce ‘otherness’ into the epistemological field. He says of critique: “[it] only exists in relation to something other than itself: it is an instrument, a means for a future or a truth that it will not know nor happen to be, it oversees a domain it

⁶³⁴ Foucault argues, “the problem is, precisely, to decide if it is actually suitable to place oneself within a ‘we’ in order to assert the principles one recognises and the values one accepts; or if it is not, rather, necessary to make the future formation of a ‘we’ possible by elaborating the question. Because it seems to me that the ‘we’ must not be previous to the question; it can only be the result—and the necessarily temporary result—of the question as it is posed in the new terms in which one formulates it.” (Ibid., 114-115.)

⁶³⁵ Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 14.

⁶³⁶ Foucault, “What is Critique?” 192.

⁶³⁷ Butler, “What is Critique?” 215.

would want to police and is unable to regulate.”⁶³⁸ By taking an attitude of critique, whether it is in relation to specific forms of government, or to the underlying arrangements of power-knowledge, the subject opens up a space or possibility for something else. There is however no sense of what that might be. Similarly, Foucault describes *parrēsia* as “an irruptive truth-telling which creates a fracture and opens up the risk: a possibility, a field of dangers, or at any rate, an undefined eventuality.”⁶³⁹ True discourse introduces a caesura into the discursive field. But there is no sense in which this caesura carries with it an alternative discourse; like critique it merely enables the possibility of *something else*. Moreover the manuscript of Foucault’s final lecture notes: “there is no establishment of the truth without an essential position of otherness; the truth is never the same; there can be truth only in the form of the other world and the other life (*l’autre monde et de la vie autre*).”⁶⁴⁰ As we see further below, this introduction of an ‘otherness’ or ‘other world’ speaks to one of the central political aims of Foucault’s accounts of *parrēsia* and critique.⁶⁴¹

Parrēsia thus appears as an actualisation of the critical attitude. Foucault conceives of true discourse as introducing a caesura into the field of existing discourses. As discourses are the visible elements of *épistémès*, a break in the discursive field signifies as an irruption in the underlying epistemological frame. Indeed the critical force of *parrēsia* is that it exposes the *limits* of a given epistemological field. *Parrēsia* signifies a “limit-situation.”⁶⁴² Truthful discourse exposes these limits by bringing into sharp relief the interdependence of given discourses and epistemics with arts of government. This is because, as Foucault sees it, these structure the discursive field in which ‘the truth’ is spoken, positing the conditions of speech, its limits and even the questions it seeks to answer. This is partly why Foucault finds rhetoric and polemics so problematic. Polemics, as we have already seen, precludes the possibility of critique, because the polemicist denies the interlocutor the right to question on the basis of her own authority. Similarly, rhetoric

⁶³⁸ Foucault, “What is Critique?” 192.

⁶³⁹ Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, 63.

⁶⁴⁰ Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 340n. This passage is part of the manuscript for the final lecture that Foucault gave at the *Collège de France*, but which he did not have time to deliver.

⁶⁴¹ As Gros puts it, Foucault “wants to emphasize that the hallmark of the true is otherness: that which makes a difference in the world and in people’s opinions, that which forces one to transform one’s mode of being, that whose difference opens up the perspective of an other world to be constructed, to be imagined.” (Frédéric Gros, “Course Context,” in *The Courage of Truth*, 356.)

⁶⁴² Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, 61.

imposes on the interlocutor a “bond of power.”⁶⁴³ Thus by introducing a caesura into this field, the space for alternative discourses emerges. In *parrēsia*, according to Foucault, “the irruption of true discourse determines an open situation, or rather opens the situation and makes possible effects which are, precisely, not known.”⁶⁴⁴ I return to this point shortly.

This account of the operation of the critical attitude in reference to *parrēsia* is not without certain problems. Particularly, the *conditions* of *parrēsia* risk undermining its critical potential. As we have seen, *parrēsia* requires that the subject and interlocutor each provide to the other an account of their relation to truth. Foucault also argues that the relationship between the speaker and interlocutor is itself a condition of *parrēsia*. As such, this relationship structures the field within which true discourse is spoken, and the conditions by which it is meaningful. Moreover, the ability of each subject to disclose their *rapport à soi* turns upon a shared framework of intelligibility. In this way, this disclosure and the *parrēsia* that it enables implicitly accept the terms set by this framework. This complicates the relationship between *parrēsia* and critique: ‘the truth’ will be determined by the norms and modes of rationality that emerge within a given historical framework of intelligibility.⁶⁴⁵ When the subject seeks to ‘speak the truth,’ she conforms to a ‘criterion of truth’ and accepts it as binding.⁶⁴⁶ In this way, both disclosing one’s *rapport à soi* and using *parrēsia* bestow a certain legitimacy upon the very norms and rationalities to which the critical attitude was to be adopted. Butler points out that accepting a criterion of truth as binding is to assume that the forms of rationality within which one lives are unquestionable.⁶⁴⁷ She argues therefore that “telling the truth about oneself comes at a price, and the price of that telling is the suspension of a critical relation to the truth regime in which one lives.”⁶⁴⁸ Indeed, the question of ethical interaction between subjects is problematised by an account in which that very encounter between subjects is mediated by the external framework by which they recognize and are intelligible to each other.⁶⁴⁹ While I disagree with Butler that suspending the critical relation

⁶⁴³ Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 14.

⁶⁴⁴ Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, 62.

⁶⁴⁵ See Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 121.

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid., 121-122.

⁶⁴⁹ Butler also points out that some instances of recognition, or *failures* in recognition, call into question, if not signify a rupture in, the framework of intelligibility. Thus, she states, “It will not do, then, to collapse the notion of the other into the sociality of norms and claim that the

signifies the unquestionability of the forms of rationality within which one lives, Butler is right to point out that the conditions of the use of *parrēsia* complicate, if not preclude, the critical capacity of this relation. I return to this point below.

While the mere possibility of an unimagined future – of an ‘other world’ – would for Foucaultians be full of promise, for those in the Habermasian camp it tends more toward a political and critical failure. This is because an unimagined future fails to suggest what should be done in order to make the world better, let alone a coherent political program. From this perspective, Foucault’s project is consistent with the more general failure of critical theory to offer a definite future path. While the operation of critique enables us to gain the critical perspective required to call in to question given foundations and institutions, none of these critical activities tell us in what direction we should move, or whether they are even achieving their intended goals.⁶⁵⁰ But for Foucault, the sense of possibility associated with the critical attitude lies precisely with its inability to predict or be limited to a definite future. Foucault himself emphasises that “the questions I am trying to ask are not determined by a pre-established political outlook and do not tend toward the realisation of some definite political project.”⁶⁵¹ Rather, he views his project as opening up concrete and general problems that “approach politics from behind and cut across societies on the diagonal.”⁶⁵² The value of the notion of the critical attitude is that it opens incalculable possibilities and an undefined space for self-creation. This is precisely what Foucault refers to as the ‘undefined work of freedom.’ Indeed, if such work resulted in a program for action, with defined, normatively justified goals, *this* would be the critical and political failure.

To judge the success or failure of Foucault’s critical project by the contribution it makes to a prescriptive political agenda is to miss the point entirely.⁶⁵³ Foucault’s contribution is to present the possibility of new forms of life and being, by pointing out the way in which the critical project of challenging the relationship between epistemologies and structures of power can be conceived in ethical terms. The critical

other is implicitly present in the norms by which recognition is conferred. Sometimes the very unrecognizability of the other brings about a crisis in the norms that govern recognition.” (Ibid., 24.)

⁶⁵⁰ Butler, “What is Critique?” 213.

⁶⁵¹ Foucault, “Politics and Ethics,” 375.

⁶⁵² Ibid., 375-376.

attitude questions the relation of authority to truth in order to challenge the epistemological frame to which it has recourse, and which it subsequently reinforces. As Butler asks: “What is the relation of knowledge to power that our epistemological certainties turn out to support a way of structuring the world that forecloses alternative possibilities of ordering?”⁶⁵⁴ In this way, Foucault’s later work continues to pose the questions of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and *The Order of Things*, but re-frames the archaeo-genealogical approach to these questions through a genealogy of the modern subject. The subject is inserted into the field under question as both part of the discursive field under question *and* as the orienting point of analysis.

The critical attitude (through *parrēsia*) creates the ‘epistemological space’ within which alternative forms of being can be pursued. Put another way, by calling into question the relation of authority to truth, the subject opens up interstices between given discourses, structures of power and epistemic frames. These interstices enable the potential for alternative means of ordering the world, and thereby the possibility of understanding ourselves in innumerable and unforeseen ways. The operation of the critical attitude is therefore fundamentally linked to the practices of self-formation—to aesthetic activities.⁶⁵⁵ As Butler notes, “this exposure of the limit of the epistemological field is linked with the practice of virtue, as if virtue is counter to regulation and order, as if virtue is thus found in the risking of established order.”⁶⁵⁶ As we have already seen, Butler understands Foucault’s reference to virtue to mean that the critical relation takes form as a “specific stylisation of morality.”⁶⁵⁷ What this means is that the adoption of a critical relation to the world (whether to a specific discourse or technology of government) forms part of the subject’s *rapport à soi*. This becomes clearer if we recall from Chapter Three Butler’s point that *rapport à soi* is established in relation to the social norms that set the limits of the intelligible formation of subjects. In this way, the subjective dimension that emerges as an

⁶⁵³ Foucault points, for example, to the importance of posing questions *to* politics rather than reinscribing the act of questioning in the framework of a political doctrine. (Foucault, “Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations,” 115.)

⁶⁵⁴ Butler, “What is Critique?” 214.

⁶⁵⁵ Such a linkage indicates development in Foucault’s thinking about critique: the ‘bundle of relationships’ that formerly constituted ‘the core of critique’ now include ‘ethics,’ and by extension politics.

⁶⁵⁶ Butler, “What is Critique?” 215.

⁶⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

undefined and undetermined result of the practices that enable this formation can challenge, if not subvert, those limits of intelligibility.⁶⁵⁸

The critical attitude thereby links the challenge of a given discourse with the de-subjugation of the subject. As already suggested, the adoption of the critical attitude opens up the interstices within which alternative forms of life and being become possible, precisely because new forms of discourse become possible. That is, the critical attitude enables new ways of ordering and understanding the world. As Butler argues, “If the desubjugation of the subject emerges at the moment in which the episteme constituted through rationalization exposes its limit, then desubjugation marks precisely the fragility and transformability of the epistemics of power.”⁶⁵⁹ In this way, the self-constituting and aesthetic practices of the subject’s *rapport à soi* that enable de-subjugation – that is, the opposite of *assujettissement* – expose the contingency and vulnerability of structures of power and the epistemological frames to which they relate.

Foucault’s attempt to expose the limits of our discourses and frameworks of understanding, from which an unimagined future might emerge, is not the theoretical risk-taking that some would have us believe. As Butler argues, “One asks about the limits of ways of knowing because one has *already* run up against a crisis within the epistemological field in which one lives [my italics].”⁶⁶⁰ From Foucault’s perspective, the whole emphasis on self-creation or self-transformation as a form of critique of these governing norms is precisely because subjects cannot recognize themselves, or see reflected in those norms the kinds of subjectivity to which they aspire. Yet Foucault fails, as Butler points out, to account for the possibility that such a critical stance might be motivated by the desire to recognize someone else, or to enable them to recognize me.⁶⁶¹ Yet the function of the critical attitude is the same: even though

⁶⁵⁸ For an analysis of the idea that critique is a technology of self, and of the relationship of Foucault’s idea of critique in comparison to Kant, see Matthew Sharpe, “‘Critique’ as Technology of the Self,” in *Foucault Studies* 2 (May, 2005): 97-116. Sharpe argues that Kantian critique can be analysed as a technology of the self in reference to the four-fold structure of *rapport à soi*. See also Dianna Taylor, “Practicing Politics with Foucault and Kant: Toward a Critical Life,” in *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 29, no. 3 (2003): 259-280. Taylor takes a different approach, arguing that in understanding critique as a mode of existence characterized by practices of the self, Foucault re-conceptualises normative concepts such as ‘freedom’ ‘obligation’ in non-normalising and politically compelling ways.

⁶⁵⁹ Butler, “What is Critique?” 222.

⁶⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁶⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 24-25. Butler argues: “For Foucault, the regime of truth comes into question because ‘I’ cannot recognize myself, or will not recognize myself within the terms that are made

Foucault does not appear to recognise this motivation, this does not preclude the possibility that critique might *enable* recognition of others. The critical attitude opens up interstices between the discourses, epistemic frames and structures of power within which subjects can experiment with alternative modes of being.

Resisting power: ethics and the critical attitude

In this final section, I return to the question of resistance. As we saw in Chapter Two, Foucault's account of power relations locates the very possibility of resistance within networks of power relations. Yet when Foucault states: "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power,"⁶⁶² he is presenting a challenge to think about power and freedom in a different way. In a way, I have argued, that is different to the interpretations of these concepts assumed by the critical positions outlined in the first and second parts of Chapter One. These implied that by inscribing the potential for resistance within networks of power, Foucault precludes the possibility of a transcendent or *a priori* normative critique, thereby rendering 'resistance' meaningless. As I have demonstrated, however, Foucault's broader account is only coherent and meaningful if the concepts of power, freedom and resistance are understood as constitutive components of a broader idea about the social.

The possibility of resistance, as we have seen, is inscribed within relations of power. Foucault means several things by this. He means that the potential for a range of possible behaviours and responses is a defining condition of relations of power. But this is not just the possibility of any action, however small. It is the possibility of acting in such a way that the relation can be altered. This is what opposes relations of power to states of domination. The latter are 'congealed' relations, where an asymmetrical relation of power has become fixed, incontrovertible.

Yet, while we can easily get at the idea that the *possibility* of resistance is inscribed within relations of power, it is more difficult to understand how this possibility is *manifested*. That is, what exactly *is* resistance? As we have seen,

available to me. In an effort to escape or overcome the terms by which subjectivation takes place, my struggle with norms is my own. His question effectively remains 'Who can I be, given the regime of truth that determines ontology for me?' He does not ask the question 'Who are you?'" (Ibid., 25.)

⁶⁶² Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 95.

Foucault rejects the idea that resistance equates to violence, or necessarily bound within other physical forms. In “The Subject and Power,” he notes that while violence may be an instrument of power, it constitutes neither its principle nor its basic nature.⁶⁶³ Thus while resistance might deploy violent means, it is itself not limited to violent or physical means. Of course, this is partly because Foucault does not conceive of the exercise of power in purely physical terms. Through the idea of government, he characterises the exercise of power as referring to the myriad of ways, tacit and explicit, overt and subtle, through our actions, speech and behaviour that we influence the actions of others. A relation of power, moreover, is also a relation of freedom that contributes to the intelligibility of those actions and inscribes them with meaning.

But how is resistance actualised? In what does it consist? The problem is not that Foucault fails to answer these questions; it is that he provides so many answers. We have seen that the inscription of resistance *in* power relations is founded in the idea that the originary constitutive relations of *rapport à soi* give way to an undetermined, spontaneous subjective dimension. This dimension can be cultivated by techniques of the self, which can themselves be characterised as modes of resistance. He also links resistance to freedom, although neither are defined in opposition to power. The care for the self, too, can cultivate the capacity for resistance, and can itself constitute a mode of resistance. Indeed the aesthetic activities of self-stylisation and self-constitution can enable resistance to both exercises of power and broader structures of normalisation. Finally, *parrēsia* is a mode of resistance to both political and other forms of power. It seems as if *everything* for Foucault can enable, if not constitute, resistance to power. (This would not be far off the mark, since power is everywhere.)

But it is in the common function of these activities that the key to understanding Foucault’s idea of resistance lies. We can understand this function not by looking to what ‘resistance’ is, but by looking to what is *being* resisted. It is less specific exercises of power than the overarching discourses, power structures and epistemic frames in reference to which these exercises of power occur. In Chapter Two I made the initial suggestion that resistance should be thought in terms of the ‘agonism’ that Foucault identifies between power relations and the “intransitivity of freedom.”⁶⁶⁴ From this perspective, resistance would be founded in the “analysis, elaboration, and

⁶⁶³ Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” 789.

bringing into question of power relations” which is “a permanent political task inherent in all social existence.”⁶⁶⁵ Resistance is constituted in those practices, activities, speeches and modes of being that not only place relations of power in question, but put into play the broader discourses and epistemic frames to which these relations refer. This is precisely why directing our political activities at ‘the state’ itself is pointless. Foucault thinks that we must attack the roots of political rationalities, and not the *effects* of these rationalities.⁶⁶⁶ In this way, Foucault’s concept of resistance is exemplified in the critical attitude. The critical attitude, as we have seen, establishes a critical relation to power—it resists power by *refusing* it. Placing in question the relation of authority to truth by refusing to be governed *like that* is the underlying model of operation of the various manifestations of resistance that Foucault describes.

But it is here that we return to a seemingly intractable problem with Foucault’s account more broadly. Does ‘refusal’ give real critical and political impetus to Foucault’s account of resistance? Does it save him from the critiques outlined in Chapter One? That is, the failure of Foucault’s account of resistance to defer to a strong normative framework, and the apparent contradiction that subsequent claims to the freedom of subjects and their capacity to resist power appears to entail. The explanation of resistance in terms of refusal would appear particularly vulnerable to the charges levelled at critical theory noted above. That is, resistance (like critical theory) fails to offer either a coherent political project, a program for change, or even picture of how a different world might look. The mistake in such interpretations, I argue, is to simply read resistance as counter-power.

In this element of *refusal*, inherent in Foucault’s idea of resistance, we can hear an echo of Albert Camus’ idea of ‘revolt’ from *The Rebel*. This is, broadly speaking, the attitude that the rebel takes in the face of oppression and social injustice. To revolt is to say ‘no’: “his [the rebel’s] ‘no’ affirms the existence of a borderline. You find the same conception in the rebel’s opinion that the other person is ‘exaggerating,’ that he is exerting his authority beyond a limit where he infringes on the rights of others.”⁶⁶⁷ Revolt adds to rebellion – the individual’s resistance to their own mortality and the meaninglessness of the universe, exemplified in the desire to transform the world into

⁶⁶⁴ Ibid., 791-792.

⁶⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁶ Foucault, “Politics and Reason,” in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, 84-85.

something else – a social element; a movement beyond the individual's concern with their own condition to a more general concern with the immediate experience of other people.

For Camus of course revolt has recourse to civic and natural rights, which does set him at some distance from Foucault. Yet they share a suspicion of politics or discourses that seek to legitimise real, immediate injustice on the basis of a guaranteed, future justice. For Foucault this is expressed primarily as a critique of governmental technologies of liberalism. For Camus, it is a suspicion of the revolutionary that “contrives, by the promise of absolute justice, the acceptance of perpetual injustice, of unlimited compromise, and of indignity.”⁶⁶⁸ As such, they share the idea of a ‘limit.’ For Foucault, as we have seen, this is expressed as the revelation of discursive and epistemic limits and the subsequent project of subverting those limits through the introduction of new discourses and subsequent possibilities for self-constitution. In this critical attitude this takes the form of a qualified refusal: to not be governed *like that*, not *by them*.⁶⁶⁹ It is any action, deliberate inaction, non-doing, which in the very least says ‘no’ to an exercise of power or to an arrangement of power-knowledge. For Camus, the rebel not only says ‘no’ in order to establish a limit; she places limits on her own rebellion. The latter must “respect the limits that it discovers in itself.”⁶⁷⁰ He argues further that if “rebellion could found a philosophy it would be a philosophy of limits, of calculated ignorance, of risk.”⁶⁷¹ But what is especially striking is the way in which this ‘limit’ is expressed in terms of the limits of one’s own life. The rebel “refuses his own condition, and his condition to a large extent is historical.”⁶⁷² In Foucaultian terms these conditions are expressed as the limits of the subject’s life and being imposed by her relation to the present.

Thus they both see this refusal, this ‘no,’ as a way of responding to and living in the world. In this sense it is a practice, a way of being. As Camus suggests in his introduction to *The Rebel*, “What matters here is not to follow things back to their origins, but, the world being what it is, to know how to live in it.”⁶⁷³ For Camus the response lies in rebellion: in the refusal of the transgression of a limit. But this

⁶⁶⁷ Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bower (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 19.

⁶⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 254.

⁶⁶⁹ See Foucault, “What is Critique?” 193.

⁶⁷⁰ Camus, *The Rebel*, 27.

⁶⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 253.

⁶⁷² *Ibid.*

response is also an affirmation. The affirmation of a limit is simultaneously the affirmation and desire to preserve what lies beyond that limit.⁶⁷⁴ In this way, Camus suggests, rebellion “lures the individual from his solitude.”⁶⁷⁵ Foucault’s invocation of refusal might similarly rescue him from certain criticisms that read his work – especially his enthusiasm for an ethic of the self conceived in aesthetic terms – as ultimately individualistic and egoistic. As we saw earlier in the chapter, it is by conceiving of human beings as subjects of power that Foucault can articulate a meaningful concept of resistance, and indeed a meaningful concept of the *right* to resistance. It is the fact of being ruled, of being subjects of power, which founds the solidarity that for Foucault is the basis of a ‘citizenry’ of recalcitrant subjects. Indeed, this resonates with Camus’ idea that it is revolt that places individuals in community with one another: “We see that the affirmation implicit in each act of revolt is extended to something which transcends the individual in so far as it removes him from his supposed solitude and supplies him with reason to act.”⁶⁷⁶ As we saw earlier, Foucault shares this idea that resistance can place individuals in community with one another, and indeed forms the basis of a certain solidarity.

Finally, it should be noted that their respective accounts are also responses to the waning of certain moral and religious forms. For Camus, the world of the rebel exists in mutual exclusion to the sacrosanct: “Is it possible to find a rule of conduct outside the realm of religion and of absolute values? That is the question raised by revolt.”⁶⁷⁷ As I noted in Chapter Five, Foucault’s turn to an ethic of the self is partly in response to the waning of traditional moral foundations. Although not posed explicitly in the same terms, Camus’ point is certainly evocative in the context of Foucault’s work: “The rebel is a man who is on the point of accepting or rejecting the sacrosanct and determined on creating a human situation where all the answers are human or, rather, formulated in terms of reason. From this moment every question, every word, is an act of rebellion.”⁶⁷⁸ I conclude with an excerpt from a late interview, where Foucault (discussing the situation in Poland in the early 1980s) sounds very much like Camus, stating that a recognition that nothing can be done *in practice* does not equate to a tacit acceptance. That non-acceptance – like Camus’ ‘no’ – is a concrete form of

⁶⁷³ Camus, “Author’s Introduction” in *The Rebel*, 12.

⁶⁷⁴ Camus, *The Rebel*, 19.

⁶⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

⁶⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

resistance. In Foucault's words: "I think this attitude [of non-acceptance] is an ethical one, but it is also political; it does not consist in saying merely, 'I protest,' but in making of that attitude a political phenomenon that is as substantial as possible, and one which those who govern, here or there, will sooner or later be obliged to take into account."⁶⁷⁹ This again evokes the *imperative* that is bound within critique: the disruption of one's thought, beliefs and behaviours through a critical stance gives way to the necessity, the imperative for some form of change.

Conclusion

In conclusion, then, we have seen how the various facets of Foucault's project culminate in the beginnings of critical framework whereby we can re-think the relations between power, politics and ethics. I described a relational account of the political field, whereby the potential for politics and political activity arises wherever relations of power extend. This enables a meaningful account of politics that is consistent with Foucault's rejection of the state and civil society as organising concepts in how we understand political action. The idea of a relational politics enables a richer account of human relationships, and how these relationships can be the foundation for an alternative conception of 'relational right.' Consistent too with his rejection of the juridico-discursive model of power and liberal technologies of government, this preliminary concept of 'right' opens up new critical and political pathways. In disrupting the alignment between politics and the public sphere, moreover, a relational account of the political field enables us to understand the political nature of aesthetic practices without resulting in the negative consequences that Rorty et. al. suppose.

As we have seen, for Foucault the subject emerges as a constitutive element of the political field. In this way aesthetic practices are posited as part of this politics. By understanding the subject as a discursive phenomenon that emerges contemporaneously with the relational fields of power and freedom, we can link the self-constitutive and self-transformative practices of the subject with the critical work involved in challenging the given discourses and epistemological frames that govern subjects' self-understanding. As I suggested in the final section, this challenge can be described as a 'refusal.' Read in conjunction with Camus, we can see how Foucault's

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid., 26.

idea of resistance is linked to an idea of human solidarity founded in the fact that we are all subjects of, and subject to, power. This sense of solidarity builds on the ‘recognition’ of other human beings as subjects of power, which together found an ethic of power.

But there is more to say about the political stakes of ‘resistance.’ The foundation of Foucault’s idea of resistance lies in refusal: refusal of forms of government, of given arrangements of power relations, of forms of subjectivity; but is this enough to provide a groundwork for individuals to establish *new* forms of subjectivity? While he does have an idea of a praxis of the self – founded in the ancient precept of the care for the self and renewed by a more recent Nietzschean aestheticism – is there enough work conducted at the level of the modern individual to ensure the political objectives he desires? Perhaps not: but we should see this more as a critical tension than as a failure. Not only does Foucault deliberately avoid being prescriptive, he hesitates at even assuming too much of a responsibility for the analyses and critical investigations that he thinks individuals should carry out for themselves.⁶⁸⁰

⁶⁷⁹ Foucault, “Politics and Ethics,” 377.

⁶⁸⁰ As James Bernauer puts it, “Foucault’s treatise, as it is encountered in his writings, constitutes a practice which educates his readers into an ethical responsibility for intellectual inquiry. It provides not an obligatory conduct but a possible escape from an intellectual milieu unnourished by ethical interrogation. Foucault’s practice of his ethic marks paths for a collaborative assumption of new responsibilities.” (Bernauer, “Foucault’s Ecstatic Thinking,” in *The Final Foucault*, 73-74.)

Conclusion: an ethic of power?

The view that Foucault fails to offer a politically meaningful account of resistance denies the theoretical and political possibilities of his broader project. Reading the concept of resistance merely as 'counter-power' not only points to broader misunderstandings of 'relations of power,' it leads to confusion about Foucault's political objectives. The confrontation of power is clearly a central political, ethical and philosophical problem in Foucault's work. Yet he approaches this problem with recourse neither to natural rights, nor to humanist conceptions of human nature. Similarly, he rejects corollary conceptions of power as a repressive, negative force and of liberty as that which is free from power. Instead, he begins by dispelling these conceptions – through his archaeo-genealogical investigations – in order to arrive at a conception of the subject of power: the body-subject that emerges within networks of power relations, yet which is capable of self-constitution.

From this point, Foucault is able to re-formulate resistance in a way that is not limited to counter-power. The problem with 'counter-power,' as we have seen, is that it tends to characterise resistance either as the opposite force of power, or as just another exercise of power. For Foucault, the former recalls the liberal tradition, implying that power can only be opposed from something other and outside itself. For Foucault's critics, however, the latter appears particularly problematic because it undermines the normative sense which resistance might otherwise be thought to entail. Yet while the possibility of resistance is inscribed within relations of power, the latter does not delimit the force, direction or expression that resistance may take. This is where the subject's capacity for self-constitution comes into play. Self-constitution employs the subjective dimension that emerges with *rapport à soi*. For Foucault, it is the cultivation of this dimension – through the practices, techniques and activities of self – that enables the subject to develop a certain critical stance in relation to herself. This is similar to Foucault's characterisation of the operation of thought. Conversely, it is thought that enables the *critical practice* of these techniques and activities. What emerges from this analysis is that the relationship between critique and self-constitution gives way to a certain circularity. Foucault thinks that critique is the movement by which the subject gives herself the right to question the relationship

between authority and truth. As we have seen, this simultaneously de-subjugates the subject and opens up the interstices within which self-constitution can be carried out. As such, critique and self-constitution appear to be mutually enabling and mutually dependent. Through the critical attitude, we arrive at the idea that resistance is founded in refusal: in the qualified refusal of given technologies and forms of government. But does this address one of the central problems posed in Chapter Two: namely, the problem of identifying what the foundation or source of the critical attitude should be today? As we have seen, Foucault rejects the humanist and liberal ideals upon which this refusal has been founded in the past.

Furthermore, as I pointed out at the end of the last chapter, the question remains as to whether the grounding of resistance in refusal is enough to inform and give impetus to modern projects of self-creation and self-transformation. Particularly, whether Foucault does enough to explain how such projects might avoid the normalising and disciplining forces that are still at play in today's societies. Can Foucault avoid all the problems he identifies, and yet still offer a groundwork for modern individuals which is both compelling and meaningful? Answering these questions requires the careful avoidance of assumptions about power and freedom that fall back upon either the juridico-discursive model or the liberal idea of the relationship between power and freedom. I thus sought in part to provide a coherent defence of Foucault's project in a way that avoids the well-known problems that arise from his often inconsistent and problematic presentation of his views. This thesis proposed approaching the question of resistance (and Foucault's project more broadly) through the idea of an 'ethic of power.' The goal of this approach was to enable a different way of thinking-through what, *given* Foucault's philosophical commitments, resistance might entail.

To this end, I pointed out the ways in which certain criticisms of Foucault's work in this area have tended to assume philosophical positions and commitments that from the outset are contrary to Foucault's own. Such criticisms are limited in the contribution that they can make to an evaluation of Foucault's project according to its internal commitments and objectives. In Chapter One I presented these criticisms in order to provide a critical framework within which the thesis as a whole rests. I noted the way in which they tend to read the lack of a strong normative foundation in Foucault's account of power as inevitably precluding the evaluation of exercises of power as acceptable or unacceptable, legitimate or illegitimate. From this perspective,

Foucault's claims to the possibility of resistance appear unfounded, if not inconsistent with other conceptual facets of his account. Similarly, his use of 'freedom' appears at odds with his broader project, since it implies a certain normative sense that Foucault is normally at pains to avoid. As I pointed out in Chapter Two, however, these interpretations turn on the assumption of a particular relationship between power and freedom that remains bound in the liberal tradition. Namely, the idea that power and freedom are mutually exclusive, whereby freedom is reduced everywhere that power is exercised. According to this view, a meaningful notion of resistance would therefore need to refer to the limitation of power and subsequent preservation of freedom. Yet, as I argued in Chapter Two, Foucault rejects these characterisations. This is particularly because he considers such ideas of freedom to be both the effects and instruments of liberal technologies of government, which deploy these concepts in order to rationalise and legitimise the very imposition of government upon these freedoms.

It is the case, however, that Foucault's descriptions of freedom – especially as a 'field of possibilities' – are liable to lead to such misunderstandings. Freedom for Foucault is not radically different from the concepts put forward by the traditions that precede him; it does in its most basic form refer to the opportunities and possibilities for a range of actions and behaviour. The point of departure is the definition of these opportunities and possibilities as lying *within* a network of power relations—*not* as external to, or defined by their exclusion from, this network. Accordingly, power does not refer to a repressive state or mechanism. Foucault thinks of power merely as a function of social interaction, and therefore an unavoidable part of everyday life. It is neither an absolute state, nor a physical capacity that can be measured and possessed. Similarly, 'government' refers to the myriad of ways – both inadvertent and deliberate – by which individuals affect each other's actions.

Neither therefore does freedom mean to be free *from* power. Nor, despite being in a sense conditions of one another, do they amount to the same thing. Thus, while he certainly rejects the notion of an absolute liberation, it is not always clear that he rejects the idea of freedom as a field of action which is increased or reduced according to the exercise of power. I argued, however, that we should understand this as a 'field' or 'domain' defined relationally *between* individuals (rather than as a space of action bound to the individual). As such, Foucault's idea of freedom is not a state or area inalienable from the individual. It is defined in and through relations between people.

This is what it means to say that power is the condition of freedom: freedom is only coherent if conceived as the possibility for a range of actions which are defined by and meaningful in the context of relations of power.

In re-conceptualizing ‘power’ and ‘freedom’ in this way, Foucault wants to move beyond more traditional political and philosophical theories. These tend to rely on certain conceptions of the subject and human being that place individual freedom, autonomy and self-determination as the key measures of what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable forms of power. Critics such as Habermas, Fraser and Taylor fall within these traditions. While they are right to point out his inconsistent use of ‘freedom’ and ‘resistance’ – particularly when it comes to the implication of a normative underpinning to these concepts – these evaluations are made from positions external to Foucault’s philosophical and political framework. Accordingly, a different evaluative framework is required to render his alternative ideas about power politically and philosophically meaningful. The key to this problem for Foucault scholars – and the challenge – is to avoid framing the idea of resistance exclusively in terms of power or freedom.

In the first part of Chapter Two I laid the groundwork for this approach by drawing out the theoretical and philosophical commitments underlying Foucault’s archaeo-genealogical approach and his analyses of critique. On one hand, in displacing the central, ordering ‘Subject’ of Western epistemologies Foucault sought to create a space in which to ‘think differently.’ In doing so he subsequently opened the possibility of inserting the subject as part of the epistemological field itself. On the other hand, in moving to a genealogy of modern Western subjects, Foucault wants to show how our modern conceptions of the self and subject are historical and cultural realities that are open to challenge. I have argued that it is in this idea that the central ethical and political objectives of Foucault’s work lie. These are, first, to reveal the epistemic and discursive conditions by which we understand ourselves and each other in particular ways; and second, to thereby open the possibility of understanding and constituting ourselves in different ways. It is from *this* perspective that Foucault’s project should be evaluated. His concept of resistance, in particular, should be appraised in terms of its contribution to achieving the success of these political aims.

Archaeology, as we saw in Chapter Two, seeks to bring to light the way that knowledge and history have been structured by specific, historical discursive conditions. Foucault’s genealogy represents a continuation of this approach, bringing

to light the discursive conditions of past and present ways of talking about, interpreting and understanding ourselves as particular kinds of subjects. What Chapter Two achieved was to illustrate the role of the analytics of power in continuing to pursue the same philosophical and political commitments underpinning the archaeo-genealogical approach. Moreover, I pointed out that Foucault's resistance to liberal and humanist conceptions of human nature and to *a priori* theories of the subject does not result in the ethical and political failure that Foucault's critics would have us believe. Just because Foucault fails to orient his work according to a founding idea of human nature, it does not follow that all is permitted, or that there are no means by which to distinguish between forms of life, or exercises of power. The rejection of these concepts is a key political and philosophical manoeuvre.

In Chapter Three I argued that Foucault's later emphasis on a self-constituting ethical subject is consistent with his earlier dismissal of 'the Subject.' The ethical subject he adopts later is not the rational, Cartesian subject separated from the world. Furthermore, his genealogy of the modern subject can be read as cementing Foucault's rejection of the sovereign, founding subject precisely because it enables the circumvention of traditional philosophies of the subject. I argued that we should also understand this movement within the context of Foucault's problems with humanism. In doing so, the later work also appears as an attempt to *restore* to the subject the power it has been denied by both liberalism and humanism. As such, this chapter supported a more synthesised reading of Foucault's work more broadly, whereby the ethical aspects of the subject provide critical and theoretical depth to Foucault's earlier thought. However, a significant problem emerged from this analysis, and one which emerged again later in the thesis, albeit in a slightly different form. That is, that the political stakes of Foucault's project are sometimes undermined by a lack of political pragmatism. In the case of humanism, Foucault's concerns fall too far on the side of the merely theoretical, appearing to place philosophical stakes before social and political realities.

In addition, in Chapter Three I addressed the criticisms outlined in the first and second parts of Chapter One. I argued that the conclusion that Foucault cannot speak about resistance in a meaningful way – because his account does not admit the body as either a bearer of *a priori* values or as endowed with a minimum strength or agency – turns on the view that to posit the body as inextricably located *within* networks of power is to posit the body as necessarily *determined* by power. I argued that to seek a

concept of the body ‘in itself’ as a foundation of a transcendent critique of power assumes an interpretation of the latter as a negative, repressive force, and as such falls back upon the juridico-discursive model of power. My response was to posit the idea of a *body-subject* that has capacities and skills that arise internal to networks of power relations, but which are not determined by them. In doing so, I adopted Deleuze’s idea of the subjective dimension, which arises out of *rapport à soi*. I complemented this idea with Butler’s analysis, which demonstrates how *rapport à soi* is established in relation to social norms. This established an initial framework within which to examine the role of social norms in Foucault’s ethics more broadly. In articulating how individuals are produced by disciplinary power, *rapport à soi* enables us to strike a balance between the individual’s subjectivation (*assujettissement*) through heteronomous exercises of power, and the capacity for self-constitution.

In Chapter Four I evaluated certain implications of *rapport à soi* for Foucault’s account of ethics more broadly. In doing so, I argued that the inter-relational structure of *rapport à soi* does not imply that human beings are ontologically indistinct. We could say both that we are distinct beings *and* that our *rapport à soi* is bound in relations with others. Subsequently I argued that care for oneself takes precedence over care for others precisely *because* of our distinctness as beings: it cultivates the capacity to care for others. In light of this, I argued that Foucault’s insistence on the imperative of care for oneself indicates a structural primacy of self over others. Yet this did not address the problem that such an account fails to show any necessary link between care for oneself and care for others.

By pointing out that ‘care’ is an attitude toward oneself, a manner of being, and an activity, I demonstrated how it *presupposes* a reflexive relationship with oneself. Care is a social practice that takes place within the socio-political domain and within concrete relationships with others. What emerged from this discussion is that we should not judge Foucault’s accounts of *rapport à soi* and care for the self by seeking evidence of a primordial ethical bearing toward other human beings (like Levinas-inspired criticisms suggest). This is not to say that there is *no* genuine ethical spirit to Foucault’s ethics, but that this spirit is derived neither from a conception of care as recognition of the absolute authority of other human beings, nor from a sense of primordial responsibility. Rather, we should instead view Foucault’s accounts of *rapport à soi* and the care for the self as founding an account of situated subjects whose responsibilities arise out of their social embeddedness. It is in terms of the

subject's relationship with herself that Foucault analyses relations to other people and conceives of our responsibilities toward them.

I argued, furthermore, that this enables a minimalist form of universalism – what Cordner calls a 'universalism of outlook' – founded in the recognition of other human beings as subjects of power. In contrast to Cordner's account, however, I argue that (following my argument that *rapport à soi* founds a culturally and historically situated form of subjectivity) this universalism of outlook should be based on the recognition of others as subjects of power. This enables a similarly situated operation of universalism that can respond to social and cultural particularity. This is compatible with Foucault's account because it does not require that individuals submit to universal moral codes, and neither does it result in the limitation of human difference. I argued, moreover, that the recognition of other human beings as subjects of power is central to his very understanding of human interaction and freedom, although Foucault's objections to humanism would preclude us from describing this acknowledgement in terms of an essential human nature.

In the final section of Chapter Four, I took the idea of a situated subjectivity founded on *rapport à soi* further, arguing that it also allows us to understand how a certain idea of situational norm is compatible with Foucault's ethics, and indeed is necessary to the overall coherence of this account. In doing so, I pointed out that Foucault does not entirely reject the influence of moral codes on individuals. Rather, these codes constitute the overarching framework within which individuals develop their ethics and *rapport à soi*. This point is significant for two reasons. First, because criticisms focusing on the apparently individualistic and egoistic nature of Foucault's ethics ignore the fact that all the elements of this ethics – including *rapport à soi*, the care for oneself, and aesthetic practices of self-stylisation – take place in reference to the broader values and moral codes of an individual's given society. They are, as I have argued, *social* practices. Second, because it is only by understanding this point that the significance of these practices for transforming individuals' relations to these values and codes becomes clear. *Rapport à soi* thus conceived is compatible with a certain kind of situational norm. That is, a norm or principle for behaviour that is associated with a specific, if not unique, situations.

From this analysis emerged the question of the extent to which Foucault thinks that such norms and principles are binding. To answer this question, I turned to the idea of 'ethical distance.' This is effectively a 'space of contemplation' enabled by

rapport à soi. I argued that the latter enables us to articulate how individuals can recognise and respond to social norms and obligations tied to social roles, while avoiding the problematic consequences of a stronger command-obedience model of ethics. Particularly, it enables the distinction between an unthinking exercise of pre-determined social roles and a reasoned and reflective execution of these roles as part of one's *rapport à soi*. Finally, I pointed out that an individual's *rapport à soi* becomes the foundation of an ethos that enables her to respond to the problem of the exercise of power. This ethos involves activities and practices that both form the foundation of the subject's self-mastery in the power she exercises over others, and represent a mode of response to heteronomous exercises of power.

In the first part of Chapter Five, I argued that the practices of the self that Foucault adopts from Antiquity represent the starting point for re-conceiving political activity and the relationship of self-constitution to politics. In doing so, I pointed out that rather than signifying the re-institution of ancient values into the modern world, Foucault's adoption of practices of the self represents a point of departure for a new 'politics of ourselves.' As I pointed out, Foucault views his analyses of ancient philosophy as a preparatory work, both reflecting upon and (to an extent) adapting ancient ethics for a modern audience. In doing so, I suggested that Foucault's work should be partly evaluated according to its contribution to assisting modern individuals to develop an ethic of the self.

To this end, I argued that the key point of similarity that Foucault identifies between Antiquity and the modern world lies in the problem of the practice of liberty. In this way, I suggested, the idea of liberty is re-instituted as a core idea in the analysis of power, although as I pointed out, it is still far from traditional liberal conceptions. The significance of this point, I argued, is that this re-emphasises the extent to which Foucault *does* think that the exercise of power is a significant problem. This is because liberty can give rise to new relations and exercises of power, and because practices of liberty represent one avenue for mediating the exercise of power. In this way the practice of liberty refers to the manifestation of the relationally defined field of action (established in Chapter Two), which is politically important because it affects the very relation from which it arises. Thus by positing *rapport à soi* as the foundation of the *practice* of liberty, the relation of politics to ethics becomes clear.

In the second section I took up the point that Foucault's work should be partly evaluated in terms of its contribution to the possibility of a modern ethic of the self.

As I have pointed out, one of the central functions of Foucault's work, particularly in its genealogical aspects, is precisely to enable us to see that the ways in which we understand ourselves and each other are not necessary. Rather, they are products of specific historical epistemological frames, and the discourses that support them. This is not only a theoretical contribution; it is precisely part of the groundwork required for elaborating an ethic of the self. Indeed, I argued that the heart of Foucault's conception of the role of the public intellectual is bound with the political enterprise of the critical attitude. The public responsibility of the intellectual and philosopher is precisely to question authority on its relation to truth: that is, to disrupt established orders of knowledge, epistemological frameworks, and their corollary structures of power. As such, I pointed out that Foucault's work demonstrates a strong sense of public responsibility.

Yet in this analysis emerged again the question of how valuable such an approach actually is. In examining how Foucault conceives of the relation of philosophy to politics this became particularly clear; the role of philosophy is not to tell governments *how* to exercise power, nor what qualifies as a *legitimate* exercise of power. Rather, the task of philosophy is to tell the truth *in relation to* power. Similarly, I pointed out how the task of constituting new forms of subjectivity while politically indispensable are nevertheless founded in *refusal*. I pointed out that while this again emphasises the extent to which Foucault aligns the role of philosophy and intellectuals with the critical attitude, there are real questions about the meaning and political efficacy of this approach. While it goes some way in *explaining* the absence of strong normative claims in his work, it does little to address the failure to offer an account of how things should actually *be*.

Conversely, however, this analysis also revealed a more pragmatic approach to the role that the intellectual or philosopher can play with regard to politics and governments. I argued that in this case their role is to disrupt congealed arrangements of power in order to give rise to the potential for political and institutional change. In doing so, I demonstrated the stronger, imperative sense of critique. The latter *forces* transformation by removing the certainty of the assumptions, beliefs and unconsidered modes of thought in which our political practices are founded. In this way, the significance of Foucault's analyses of 'critique' are not limited to their theoretical contribution to the philosophical tradition. They play both a theoretically and

practically indispensable role in how he conceives of politics, the relation of philosophy to politics, and the relationship between ethics and politics.

In the third and fourth sections of Chapter Five I then examined the ethical and political implications of Foucault's emphasis on aesthetic practices. In doing so I argued that over-emphasising the artistic analogy unfairly limits aesthetic practices to the pursuit of a beautiful life, which is misleading in terms of Foucault's ethical and political objectives. Particularly, it over-emphasises the superficial and sensuous aspect of such practices, and as Bennett points out, undermines the sense in which such practices can be conceived as properly 'ethical.'⁶⁸¹ Furthermore, I argued that such criticisms over-emphasise the Nietzschean elements of Foucault's account and thus misconstrue his political objectives.

Unlike Nietzsche, Foucault does not turn to aesthetics in order to create a new 'table of good.' Rather, the subject's aesthetic practices take place in relation to *existing* tables of good. Furthermore, Foucault's use of aesthetic practices neither signifies a turning away from worldly problems, nor indicates a disregard for the concerns of the *polis*. Overly Nietzschean interpretations of this idea downplay the extent to which *rappport à soi* embeds aesthetic practices *within* socio-political reality, and that these practices are only an *element* of Foucault's ethics. The latter retains a strong dependence on the overarching moral codes and social practices in which aesthetic activities are carried out. Finally, I argued that aesthetic practices should be conceived as political activities. (In this way, Foucault does not necessarily suspend the distinction between the public and private spheres, but disrupts the correlation of the political with the public.) In contrast to Rorty, who thinks that such practices should remain relegated to the private sphere, I pointed out that Foucault thinks we should disassociate the political relevance of such activities from their interplay or dependence upon the state or other liberal institutions.

Finally, in the last section of Chapter Five I examined Foucault's analyses of ancient dietetic practices, in order to evaluate the critical contribution that Foucault's emphasis on techniques and practices of the self make to achieving his political objectives. In doing so, I pointed out that these analyses support my view that Foucault's work in this area requires a re-thinking of the alignment between the public sphere and political activities. By positing dietetic practices more broadly in terms of

⁶⁸¹ Bennett, "How is It, Then," 654.

practices of the self, and by linking them with the individual's participation in politics and community life, Foucault questions the relegation of such activities to the realm of the 'private' and 'feminine' in order to deny them political significance. As such, I argued that the real political value of these analyses for a modern ethic of the self is that they illustrate how modern individuals can use such practices to challenge given discourses about the self and subjectivity. Moreover, they enable modern subjects to challenge given epistemic categorisations that govern how we understand, recognise and make sense of ourselves and others.

What emerged in this analysis, however, is that techniques of the self can be deployed to contradictory ends, especially where practices conducted under the heading of self-care or self-development can be re-deployed to subjectivising [*assujettissement*] and disciplining ends. As such, the extent to which they constitute a mode of resistance will always be in question. My response to this problem was to point out that while this remains a real possibility, what is both theoretically and politically significant is that subjects can nevertheless participate in such practices in a *critical* way. Yet, as I observed, this does point to a certain weakness in Foucault's account, and one which also emerged in the final chapter of this thesis. That is, that the unwillingness to prescribe certain actions or behaviour, or to make normatively founded judgements about 'good' and 'bad' exercises of power, limits Foucault to showing the ways in which our assumptions, practices and ways of understanding ourselves are determined by historically and culturally specific discourses and *épistémès*.

Finally, in Chapter Six, I took up these political issues and returned to the idea of the critical attitude and its implications for 'resistance.' I argued that relations of power, read in conjunction with the disassociation of political power from the state, requires an alternative political model organised around 'relations of power.' In developing this alternative approach, I pointed to the discursive field as the primary site of political contestation. Discourse, I suggested, marks the site of interplay between the epistemological frameworks and structures of power of a given society. As such, discourse is a 'strategic field,' where subjects can use discourse as both an instrument of control and as a countervailing force. This is essential to understanding the operation and significance of the critical attitude, since it is irruptions in the discursive field that open the interstices within which individuals can promote new forms of subjectivity. This is because discourses are not merely the surface of

historical arrangements of power, but feed into and support those arrangements, which set the limits of experience and the terms of intelligibility.

In addition, I pointed out that a relational politics enables the articulation of a notion of ‘relational right’ that is compatible with Foucault’s broader philosophical commitments. It promotes a richer account of human relationships and seeks to disassociate the regulation of these relationships from statist institutions. Indeed, it is in this context that Foucault moves toward the idea of a relational right, and further away from rights as defined and guaranteed by the state. Such rights are de-identified from individuals and emerge instead from relations *between* individuals. Moreover, I argued that these culminate in the idea of a common right to resistance, based on a solidarity that emerges from the recognition that we are all subjects of, and subject to, power.

In the second section I returned to the idea of the critical attitude in order to evaluate its success in contributing to a conception of political activity as work carried out upon oneself *through* a critically practiced challenge to given frameworks of interpretation. I argued that in line with the idea that discourse constitutes the primary site of political contestation, critique should be understood as the foundation of, if not the primary form, of political activity. In doing so, I turned to the concept of *parrēsia*, which introduces a break – a caesura – into the discursive field, and exposes the limits of a given epistemology. It is within this space that alternative discourses and ways of ordering the world can emerge. Similarly, I argued that it is in adopting a critical stance that subjects can open up the interstices within which they can understand and form themselves in innumerable and unforeseen ways.

In the final section of Chapter Six, I returned to the concept of resistance. I pointed out that the inscription of the possibility of resistance within power relations does not lead to the formulation of resistance merely as ‘counter-power.’ While resistance does, in part, refer to recalcitrance against given exercises of power, this is not the whole story. I pointed out that this recalcitrance should be thought instead as the ‘agonism’ of placing power relations in question, a task which is bound within the embeddedness of our situated subjectivity. In doing so, I argued that the primary *targets* of resistance are the overarching discourses, structures of power and epistemic frames which govern that subjectivity. The critical attitude resists power by *refusing* it. In drawing out the similarities of this refusal with Camus’ idea of rebellion, I argued

that while we should understand this refusal as a ‘no,’ it is nevertheless a concrete way of living in and responding to the world.

A politics of refusal

Foucault’s genealogical analyses reveal the historical specificity of the epistemological and discursive frameworks through which we understand ourselves as subjects. While these analyses are a groundwork for the possibility of a modern ethic of the self, it is nonetheless clear that this is a mere prelude to the work that individuals would need to undertake in order to establish and develop their own ethic. Foucault merely begins this task by introducing a caesura into philosophical and political discourses. This caesura begins to open the interstices between the given discursive fields, structures of power, and epistemic frames of modern Western societies within which we can begin the work of constituting an ethic of the self.

Foucault effectively synthesises the problem of governmentality – which can also be thought of as the question of ‘power’ – with the question and problem of critique. Foucault links the possibility of new forms of subjectivity with the ‘liberation’ of the individual from the state and its individualising mechanisms.⁶⁸² This liberation is not framed in terms of the problem of how to ‘release’ individuals from the grip of power or governmental institutions. Rather, the problem of how to refuse given arts of government is fundamentally linked to question of the present—of who we understand ourselves to be and of the conditions of that understanding.⁶⁸³ In this way, we should understand the question of resistance in terms of its challenge to the discursive, epistemic and power structures that frame our being and living in the world. In light of this, I have argued that we should look to the critical attitude – the right to qualified refusal of given forms of government – as the foundation of a meaningful concept of resistance.

The subject is a discursive phenomenon that emerges contemporaneously with relations of power and freedom. The discursive field marks the site of interplay between the epistemic frames and structures of power of a given society. It is by

⁶⁸² Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” 785.

⁶⁸³ We should recall from *Discipline and Punish* Foucault’s description of the relationship between relations of power and fields of knowledge: “power and knowledge directly imply one another [...] there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of

calling into question the relation of authority to truth that the subject can open up interstices between given discourses, structures of power and epistemological frames. These interstices enable alternative ways of understanding and ordering the world and therefore the possibility of understanding ourselves in innumerable and unforeseen ways.

The task of questioning relations of power is founded in the critical practices of self-constitution. As such, *rapport à soi* can be thought of as the ‘permanent limit’ to relations of power and arts of government.⁶⁸⁴ To adopt an attitude of critique is to ‘problematize’ one’s relation to the present, to the world. It is a way of understanding ourselves in relation to the given discourses, epistemological frameworks and corollary structures of power in which we live. Continuous work upon the self – conceived through the concepts of the care of the self and aesthetic self-stylization – cultivates the capacity to ‘step back,’ as it were, from a given way of thinking, behaving, or being in relation to others. Evoking Foucault’s definition of ‘thought,’ the latter is itself posed as an object of analysis and contemplation in order to question its underlying conditions, assumptions, prejudices. Indeed, philosophical activity is precisely the critical work of calling into question what is ‘known’ in order to establish the possibility of thinking differently. It is an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought—a practice of self that shapes one’s *rapport à soi*.

Recognising how our understanding of ourselves is influenced and determined by these can inform our self-constitution in such a way to resist these forms of being and give rise to new forms of subjectivity. In this way, the activity of critique is a form of ‘asceticism’—of ethical work upon oneself. It is a lived activity. Through the practices of self that refine our *rapport à soi*, the possibility of critique is inscribed in our very being and embodiment as historical and cultural realities, which renders it part of the work of freedom. Most significantly, however, the critical attitude is a stance that one takes in relation to oneself and to the world which enables the perpetual posing of the question ‘how not to be governed?’

Like Camus, the foundation of Foucault’s concept of resistance lies in refusal, in a ‘no.’ Indeed, I have argued that Foucault’s work presents the possibility of a

knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 27.)

continual ‘no,’ founded in critical practices of the self. Similarly, this resonates with Camus’ idea that it is revolt that places individuals in community with one another; that gives the individual reason to act by removing her from her solitude.⁶⁸⁵ There is a positivity in this refusal: “Rebellion, though apparently negative since it creates nothing, is profoundly positive in that it reveals the part of man which must always be defended.”⁶⁸⁶ It is in recognition of the commonality of being subjects of, and subject to, power from which the ‘solidarity’ bound within resistance emerges. It is by conceiving of human beings as subjects of power that Foucault is able to articulate a meaningful concept of resistance, and indeed a meaningful concept of the *right* to resistance. It is the fact of being ruled, of being subjects of power, which forms the commonality that for Foucault is the basis of an ‘international citizenry.’

The adoption of the critical attitude as resistance recognises that critique is a lived activity that follows from our social embeddedness as concrete, historical realities. The subjective dimension that emerges as an undetermined and undefined result of the practices of *rapport à soi* enables the challenge, if not the subversion, of the limits of intelligibility. To be a self-constituting subject of power means that one’s reflexive dimension – that which constitutes oneself *as subject* – emerges through relations of power with others. The recognition that we are each subjects of, and subject to, power forms the basis of a solidarity in refusal. The fact of our being subjects of power is the basis of a minimalist form of human being.⁶⁸⁷ That ‘we are all ruled’ – that we are all subjects of power – is the basis of a common ethic of power and right to resistance.

⁶⁸⁴ As Deleuze puts it, “There will always be a relation to oneself which resist codes and power; the relation to oneself is even one of the origins of these points of resistance.” (Deleuze, *Foucault*, 103.)

⁶⁸⁵ Camus, *The Rebel*, 21-22.

⁶⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁶⁸⁷ Indeed, Foucault does not necessarily reject all tenets of humanism; his project is far more concerned with restoring the power to the subject that liberal humanism has denied it. As Veyne points out, Foucault “was not the enemy of man and humanity that he was believed to be. He simply reckoned that humanity could not get any absolute truth to descend from heaven or to operate, in sovereign manner, in a heaven of truths. He believed that all he could do was react to the truths and realities of his time and perhaps respond to them in an innovative fashion.” (Veyne, *Foucault*, 2.) Cf. Patton, “Foucault’s Subject of Power.”

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