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What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue

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What is it to offer a critique? [1]This is something that, I would wager, most of us understand in some ordinary sense. But matters become more vexing if we attempt to distinguish between a critique of this or that position and critique as a more generalized practice, one that might be described without reference to its specific objects. Can we even ask such a question about the generalized character of critique without gesturing toward an essence of critique? And if we achieved the generalized picture, offering something which approaches a philosophy of critique, would we then lose the very distinction between philosophy and critique that operates as part of the definition of critique itself? Critique is always a critique *of* some instituted practice, discourse, episteme, institution, and it loses its character the moment in which it is abstracted from its operation and made to stand alone as a purely generalizable practice. But if this is true, this does not mean that no generalizations are possible or that, indeed, we are mired in particularisms. On the contrary, we tread here in an area of constrained generality, one which broaches the philosophical, but must, if it is to remain critical, remain at a distance from that very achievement.

The essay I offer here is about Foucault, but let me begin by suggesting what I take to be an interesting parallel between what Raymond Williams and Theodor Adorno, in different ways, sought to accomplish under the name of "criticism" and what Foucault sought to understand by "critique." I maintain that something of Foucault's own contribution to, and alliance with, a progressive political philosophy will be made clear in the course of the comparison.

Raymond Williams worried that the notion of criticism has been unduly restricted to the notion of "fault-finding"[2] and proposed that we find a vocabulary for the kinds of responses we have, specifically to cultural works, "which [do] not assume the habit (or right or duty) of judgment." And what he called for was a more specific kind of response, one that did not generalize too quickly: "what always needs to be understood," he wrote, "is the specificity of the response, which is not a judgment, but a practice."(76) I believe this last line also marks the trajectory of Foucault's thinking on this topic, since "critique" is precisely a practice that not only suspends judgment for him, but offers a new practice of values based on that very suspension.

So, for Williams, the practice of critique is not reducible to arriving at judgments (and expressing them). Significantly, Adorno makes a similar claim when he writes of the "danger…of judging intellectual phenomena in a subsumptive, uninformed and administrative manner and assimilating them into the prevailing constellations of power which the intellect ought to expose."[3] So, the task of exposing those "constellations of power" is impeded by the rush to "judgment" as the exemplary act of critique. For Adorno, the very operation of judgment serves to separate the critic from the social world at hand, a move which deratifies the results of its own operation, constituting a "withdrawal from praxis." (23) Adorno

writes that the critic's "very sovereignty, the claim to a more profound knowledge of the object, the separation of the idea from its object through the independence of the critical judgment threatens to succumb to the thinglike form of the object when cultural criticism appeals to a collection of ideas on display, as it were, and fetishizes isolated categories."(23) For critique to operate as part of a praxis, for Adorno, is for it to apprehend the ways in which categories are themselves instituted, how the field of knowledge is ordered, and how what it suppresses returns, as it were, as its own constitutive occlusion. Judgments operate for both thinkers as ways to subsume a particular under an already constituted category, whereas critique asks after the occlusive constitution of the field of categories themselves. What becomes especially important for Foucault in this domain, to try to think the problem of freedom and, indeed, ethics in general, beyond judgment: critical thinking constitutes this kind of effort.

In 1978, Foucault delivered a lecture entitled, "What is Critique?", [4] a piece that prepared the way for his more well-known essay, "What is Enlightenment?" (1984). He not only asks what critique is, but seeks to understand the kind of question that critique institutes, offering some tentative ways of circumscribing its activity. What remains perhaps most important about that lecture, and the more developed essay that followed, is the question form in which the matter is put. For the very question, "what is critique?" is an instance of the critical enterprise in question, and so the question not only poses the problem—what is this critique that we supposedly do or, indeed, aspire to do?—but enacts a certain mode of questioning which will prove central to the activity of critique itself.

Indeed, I would suggest that what Foucault seeks to do with this question is something quite different from what we have perhaps

come to expect from critique. Habermas made the operation of critique quite problematic when he suggested that a move beyond critical theory was required if we are to seek recourse to norms in making evaluative judgments about social conditions and social goals. The perspective of critique, in his view, is able to call foundations into question, denaturalize social and political hierarchy, and even establish perspectives by which a certain distance on the naturalized world can be had. But none of these activities can tell us in what direction we ought to move, nor can they tell us whether the activities in which we engage are realizing certain kinds of normatively justified goals. Hence, in his view, critical theory had to give way to a stronger normative theory, such as communicative action, in order to supply a foundation for critical theory, enabling strong normative judgments to be made, [5] and for politics not only to have a clear aim and normative aspiration, but for us to be able to evaluate current practices in terms of their abilities to reach those goals. In making this kind of criticism of critique, Habermas became curiously uncritical about the very sense of normativity he deployed. For the question, "what are we to do?" presupposes that the "we" has been formed and that it is known, that its action is possible, and the field in which it might act is delimited. But if those very formations and delimitations have normative consequences, then it will be necessary to ask after the values that set the stage for action, and this will be an important dimension of any critical inquiry into normative matters.

And though the Habermasians may have an answer to this problem, my aim today is not to rehearse these debates nor to answer them, but to mark the distance between a notion of critique that is characterized as normatively impoverished in some sense, and another, which I hope to offer here, which is not only

more complex than the usual criticism assumes but which has, I would argue, strong normative commitments that appear in forms that would be difficult, if not impossible, to read within the current grammars of normativity. Indeed, in this essay, I hope to show that Foucault not only makes an important contribution to normative theory, but that both his aesthetics and his account of the subject are integrally related to both his ethics and politics. Whereas some have dismissed him as an aesthete or, indeed, as a nihilist, I hope to suggest that the foray he makes into the topic of self-making and, by presupposition, into poiesis itself is central to the politics of desubjugation that he proposes. Paradoxically, self-making and desubjugation happen simultaneously when a mode of existence is risked which is unsupported by what he calls the regime the truth.

Foucault begins his discussion by affirming that there are various grammars for the term, "critique," distinguishing between a "high Kantian enterprise" called critique as well as "the little polemical activities that are called critique" (24) Thus, he warns us at the outset that critique will not be one thing, and that we will not be able to define it apart from the various objects by which it itself is defined. "By its function," he writes "[critique] seems to be condemned to dispersion, dependency and pure heteronomy." "It only exists in relation to something other than itself."

Thus, Foucault seeks to define critique, but finds that only a series of approximations are possible. Critique will be dependent on its objects, but its objects will in turn define the very meaning of critique. Further, the primary task of critique will not be to evaluate whether its objects —social conditions, practices, forms of knowledge, power, and discourse—are good or bad, valued highly or demeaned, but to bring into relief the very framework of evaluation itself. What is the relation of knowledge to power such

that our epistemological certainties turn out to support a way of structuring the world that forecloses alternative possibilities of ordering? Of course, we may think that we need epistemological certainty in order to state for sure that the world is and ought to be ordered a given way. To what extent, however, is that certainty orchestrated by forms of knowledge precisely in order to foreclose the possibility of thinking otherwise? Now, one might wisely ask, what good is thinking otherwise, if we don't know in advance that thinking otherwise will produce a better world? If we do not have a moral framework in which to decide with knowingness that certain new possibilities or ways of thinking otherwise will bring forth that world whose betterness we can judge by sure and already established standards? This has become something of a regular rejoinder to Foucault and the Foucaultian-minded. And shall we assume that the relative silence that has greeted this habit of fault-finding in Foucault is a sign that his theory has no reassuring answers to give? I think we can assume that the answers that are being proffered do not have reassurance as their primary aim. This is, of course, not to say what withdraws reassurance is, by definition, not an answer. Indeed, the only rejoinder, it seems to me, is to return to a more fundamental meaning of "critique" in order to see what may well be wrong with the question as it is posed and, indeed, to pose the question anew, so that a more productive approach to the place of ethics within politics might be mapped. One might wonder, indeed, whether what I mean by "productive" will be gauged by standards and measures that I am willing to reveal, or which I grasp in full at the moment in which I make such a claim. But here I would ask for your patience since it turns out that critique is a practice that requires a certain amount of patience in the same way that reading, according to Nietzsche, required that we act a bit more like cows than humans and learn the art of slow rumination.

Foucault's contribution to what appears as an impasse within critical and post-critical theory of our time is precisely to ask us to rethink critique as a practice in which we pose the question of the limits of our most sure ways of knowing, what Williams referred to as our "uncritical habits of mind" and what Adorno described as ideology (where the "unideological thought is that which does not permit itself to be reduced to 'operational terms' and instead strives solely to help the things themselves to that articulation from which they are otherwise cut off by the prevailing language."[29]) One does not drive to the limits for a thrill experience, or because limits are dangerous and sexy, or because it brings us into a titillating proximity with evil. 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. The categories by which social life are ordered produce a certain incoherence or entire realms of unspeakability. And it is from this condition, the tear in the fabric of our epistemological web, that the practice of critique emerges, with the awareness that no discourse is adequate here or that our reigning discourses have produced an impasse. Indeed, the very debate in which the strong normative view wars with critical theory may produce precisely that form of discursive impasse from which the necessity and urgency of critique emerges.

For Foucault, critique is "a means for a future or a truth that it will not know nor happen to be, it oversees a domain it would not want to police and is unable to regulate." So critique will be that perspective on established and ordering ways of knowing which is not immediately assimilated into that ordering function. Significantly, for Foucault, 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 itself is to be found in the risking of established order. He is not shy about the

relation here. He writes, “there is something in critique that is akin to virtue.” And then he says something which might be considered even more surprising: “this critical attitude [is] virtue in general.” (25)

There are some preliminary ways we can understand Foucault’s effort to cast critique as virtue. Virtue is most often understood either as an attribute or a practice of a subject, or indeed a quality that conditions and characterizes a certain kind of action or practice. It belongs to an ethics which is not fulfilled merely by following objectively formulated rules or laws. And virtue is not only a *way* of complying with or conforming with preestablished norms. It is, more radically, a critical relation to those norms, one which,
for Foucault, takes shape as a specific stylization of morality.

Foucault gives us an indication of what he means by virtue in the introduction to *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality, Volume Two.*[6] At this juncture he makes clear that he seeks to move beyond a notion of ethical philosophy that issues a set of prescriptions. Just as critique intersects with philosophy without quite coinciding with it, so Foucault in that introduction seeks to make of his own thought an example of a non-prescriptive form of moral inquiry. In the same way, he will later ask about forms of moral experience that are not rigidly defined by a juridical law, a rule or command to which the self is said mechanically or uniformly to submit. The essay that he writes, he tells us, is itself the example of such a practice, “to explore what might be changed, in its own thought, through the practice of a knowledge that is foreign to it.” (9) Moral experience has to do with a self-transformation prompted by a form of knowledge that is foreign to one’s own. And this form of moral experience will be different from the submission to a command. Indeed, to the extent that

Foucault interrogates moral experience here or elsewhere, he understands himself to be making an inquiry into moral experiences that are not primarily or fundamentally structured by prohibition or interdiction.

In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*,[7] he sought to show that the primary interdictions assumed by psychoanalysis and the structuralist account of cultural prohibitions cannot be assumed as historical constants. Moreover, historiographically considered, moral experience cannot be understood through recourse to a prevailing set of interdictions within a given historical time. Although there are codes to be studied, these codes must always be studied in relation to the modes of subjectivation to which they correspond. He makes the claim that the juridification of law achieves a certain hegemony within the thirteenth century, but that if one goes back to Greek and Roman classical cultures, one finds practices, or "arts of existence" (10) which have to do with a cultivated relation of the self to itself.

Introducing the notion of "arts of existence," Foucault also reintroduces and reemphasizes "intentional and voluntary actions," specifically, "those actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an oeuvre." Such lives do not simply conform to moral precepts or norms in such a way that selves, considered preformed or ready-made, fit themselves into a mold that is set forth by the precept. On the contrary, the self fashions itself in terms of the norm, comes to inhabit and incorporate the norm, but *the norm is not in this sense external to the principle by which the self is formed*. What is at issue for him is not behaviors or ideas or societies or "ideologies," but "the problematizations through which being offers itself to be,

necessarily, thought—and the practices on the basis of which these problematizations are formed."(11)

This last claim is hardly transparent, but what it suggests is that certain kinds of practices which are designed to handle certain kinds of problems produce, over time, a settled domain of ontology as their consequence, and this ontological domain, in turn, constrains our understanding of what is possible. Only with reference to this prevailing ontological horizon, itself instituted through a set of practices, will we be able to understand the kinds of relations to moral precepts that have been formed as well as those that are yet to be formed. For instance, he considers at length various practices of austerity, and he ties these to the production of a certain kind of masculine subject. The practices of austerity do not attest to a single and abiding prohibition, but work in the service of crafting a certain kind of self. Or put in a more precise way, the self, incorporating the rules of conduct that represent the virtue of austerity, creates itself as a specific kind of subject. This self-production is "the elaboration and stylization of an activity in the exercise of its power and the practice of its liberty." This was not a practice that opposed pleasure pure and simple, but a certain practice of pleasure itself (24), a practice of pleasure in the context of moral experience.

Thus, in section 3 of that same introduction, Foucault makes clear that it will not suffice to offer a chronicled history of moral codes, for such a history cannot tell us how these codes were lived and, more specifically, what forms of subject-formation such codes required and facilitated. Here he begins to sound like a phenomenologist. But there is, in addition to the recourse to the experiential means by which moral categories are grasped, a critical move as well, for the subjective relation to those norms will be neither predictable nor mechanical. The relation will be 'critical' in

the sense that it will not comply with a given category, but rather constitute an interrogatory relation to the field of categorization itself, referring at least implicitly to the limits of the epistemological horizon within which practices are formed. The point will not be to refer practice to a pregiven epistemological context, but to establish critique as the very practice that exposes the limits of that epistemological horizon itself, making the contours of the horizon appear, as it were, for the first time, we might say, in relation to its own limit. Moreover, the critical practice in question turns out to entail self-transformation in relation to a rule of conduct. How, then, does self-transformation lead to the exposure of this limit? How is self-transformation understood as a "practice of liberty," and how is this practice understood as part of Foucault's lexicon of virtue?

Let us begin first by understanding the notion of self-transformation at stake here, and then consider how it is related to the problem called "critique" which forms the focus of our deliberations here. It is, of course, one thing to conduct oneself in relation to a code of conduct, and it is another thing to form oneself as an ethical subject in relation to a code of conduct (and it will be yet another thing to form oneself as that which risks the orderliness of the code itself). The rules of chastity provide an important example for Foucault. There is a difference, for instance, in not acting on desires that would violate a precept to which one is morally bound and developing a practice of desire, so to speak, which is informed by a certain ethical project or task. The model according to which submitting to a rule of law is required would involve one in not acting in certain ways, installing an effective prohibition against the acting out of certain desires. But the model which Foucault seeks to understand and, indeed, to incorporate and exemplify takes moral prescription to participate in the

forming of a kind of action. Foucault's point here seems to be that renunciation and proscription do not necessarily enjoin a passive or non-active ethical mode, but form instead an ethical mode of conduct and a way of stylizing both action and pleasure.

I believe this contrast that Foucault lays out between a command-based ethics and the ethical practice which centrally engages the formation of the self sheds important light on the distinction between obedience and virtue that he offers in his essay, "What is Critique?" Foucault contrasts this yet to be defined understanding of "virtue" with obedience, showing how the possibility of this form of virtue is established through its difference from an uncritical obedience to authority.

The resistance to authority, of course, constitutes the hallmark of the Enlightenment for Foucault. And he offers us a reading of the Enlightenment which not only establishes his own continuity with its aims, but reads his own dilemmas back into the history of the Enlightenment itself. The account he provides is one that no "Enlightenment" thinker would accept, but this resistance would not invalidate the characterization at hand, for what Foucault seeks in the characterization of the Enlightenment is precisely what remains "unthought" within its own terms: hence, his is a critical history. In his view, critique begins with questioning the demand for absolute obedience and subjecting every governmental obligation imposed on subjects to a rational and reflective evaluation. Although Foucault will not follow this turn to reason, he will nevertheless ask what criteria delimit the sorts of reasons that can come to bear on the question of obedience. He will be particularly interested in the problem of how that delimited field forms the subject and how, in turn, a subject comes to form and reform those reasons. This capacity to form reasons will be importantly linked to the self-transformative relation mentioned

above. To be critical of an authority that poses as absolute requires a critical practice that has self-transformation at its core.

But how do we move from understanding the reasons we might have for consenting to a demand to forming those reasons for ourselves, to transforming ourselves in the course of producing those reasons (and, finally, putting at risk the field of reason itself)? Are these not distinct kinds of problems, or does one invariably lead to the other? Is the autonomy achieved in forming reasons which serve as the basis for accepting or rejecting a pregiven law the same as the transformation of the self that takes place when a rule becomes incorporated into the very action of the subject? As we shall see, both the transformation of the self in relation to ethical precepts and the practice of critique are considered forms of "art," stylizations and repetitions, suggesting that there is no possibility of accepting or refusing a rule without a self who is stylized in response to the ethical demand upon it.

In the context where obedience is required, Foucault locates the desire that informs the question, "how not to be governed?" (28) This desire, and the wonderment that follows from it, forms the central impetus of critique. It is of course unclear how the desire not to be governed is linked with virtue. He does make clear, however, that he is not posing the possibility of radical anarchy, and that the question is not how to become radically ungovernable. It is a specific question that emerges in relation to a specific form of government: "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."

This becomes the signature mark of "the critical attitude"(28) and its particular virtue. For Foucault, the question itself inaugurates

both a moral and political attitude, “the art of not being governed or, better, the art of not being governed like that and at that cost.”(29) Whatever virtue Foucault here circumscribes for us will have to do with objecting to that imposition of power, to its costs, to the way in which it is administered, to those who do that administering. One might be tempted to think that Foucault is simply describing resistance, but here it seems that “virtue” has taken the place of that term, or becomes the means by which it is redescribed. We will have to ask why. Moreover, this virtue is described as well as an “art,” the art of not being governed “quite so much,” so what is the relation between aesthetics and ethics at work here?

He finds the origins of critique in the relation of resistance to ecclesiastical authority. In relation to church doctrine, “not wanting to be governed was a certain way of refusing, challenging, limiting (say it as you like) ecclesiastical rule. It meant returning to the Scriptures…it meant questioning what kind of truth the Scriptures told.” (30). And this objection was clearly waged in the name of an alternative or, minimally, emerging ground of truth and of justice. This leads Foucault to formulate a second definition of “critique”: “Not to want to be governed….not wanting to accept these laws because they are unjust because…they hide a fundamental illegitimacy.”(30)

Critique is that which exposes this illegitimacy, but it is not because critique has recourse to a more fundamental political or moral order. Foucault writes that the critical project is “confronted with government and the obedience it stipulates” and that what “critique means” in this context is “putting forth universal and indefeasible rights to which every government, whatever it may be, whether a monarch, a magistrate, an educator or a pater familias, will have to submit.”(30). The practice of critique, however, does

not discover these universal rights, as Enlightenment theorists claim, but it does "put them forth." However, it does not put them forth not as positive rights. The "putting forth" is an act which limits the power of the law, an act which counters and rivals the workings of power, power at the moment of its renewal. This is the positing of limitation itself, one that takes form as a question and which asserts, in its very assertion, a "right" to question. From the sixteenth century on, the question "how not to be governed" becomes specified as "What are the limits of the right to govern?"(31) "'To not 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 that it is true, but rather accepting it only if one considers valid the reasons for doing so." There is of course a fair amount of ambiguity in this situation, for what will constitute a ground of validity for accepting authority? Does the validity derive from the consent to accept authority? If so, does consent validate the reasons offered, whatever they are? Or is it rather the case that it is only on the basis of a prior and discoverable validity that one offers one's consent? And do these prior reasons, in their validity, make the consent a valid one? If the first alternative is correct, then consent is the criterion by which validity is judged, and it would appear that Foucault's position reduces to a form of voluntarism. But perhaps what he is offering us by way of "critique" is an act, even a practice of freedom, which cannot reduce to voluntarism in any easy way. For the practice by which the limits to absolute authority are set is one that is fundamentally dependent on the horizon of knowledge effects within which it operates. The critical practice does not well up from the innate freedom of the soul, but is formed instead in the crucible of a particular exchange between a set of rules or precepts (which are already there) and a stylization of acts (which extends and reformulates that prior set of rules and precepts). This

stylization of the self in relation to the rules comes to count as a "practice."

In Foucault's view, following Kant in an attenuated sense, the act of consent is a reflexive movement by which validity is attributed to or withdrawn from authority. But this reflexivity does not take place internal to a subject. For Foucault, this is an act which poses some risk, for the point will not only be to object to this or that governmental demand, but to ask about the order in which such a demand becomes legible and possible. And if what one objects to are the epistemological orderings that have established the rules of governmental validity, then saying "no" to the demand will require departing from the established grounds of its validity, marking the limit of that validity, which is something different and far more risky than finding a given demand invalid. In this difference, we might say, one begins to enter a critical relation to such orderings and the ethical precepts to which they give rise. The problem with those grounds that Foucault calls "illegitimate" is not that they are partial or self-contradictory or that they lead to hypocritical moral stands. The problem is precisely that they seek to foreclose the critical relation, that is, to extend their own power to order the entire field of moral and political judgment. They orchestrate and exhaust the field of certainty itself. How does one call into question the exhaustive hold that such rules of ordering have upon certainty without risking uncertainty, without inhabiting that place of wavering which exposes one to the charge of immorality, evil, aestheticism. The critical attitude is not moral according to the rules whose limits that very critical relation seeks to interrogate. But how else can critique do its job without risking the denunciations of those who naturalize and render hegemonic the very moral terms put into question by critique itself?

Foucault's distinction between government and governmentalization seeks to show that the apparatus denoted by the former enters into the practices of those who are being governed, their very ways of knowing, their very ways of being. 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. A subject will emerge in relation to an established order of truth, but it can also take a point of view on that established order that retrospectively suspends its own ontological ground.

> If governmentalization is...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 will say that *critique is the movement by which the subject gives himself the right (le sujet se donne le droit) to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth.* (my emphasis, English text, 32; French text, 39)

Note here that the subject is said to "give himself that right," a mode of self-allocation and selfauthorization that seems to foreground the reflexivity of the claim. Is this, then, a self-generated movement, one which shores up the subject over and against a countervailing authority? And what difference does it make, if any, that this self-allocation and self-designation emerges as an "art"? "Critique," he writes, "will be the art of voluntary insubordination, that of reflected intractability [*l'indocilité réfléchie*]." If it is an "art" in his sense, then critique will not be a single act, nor will it belong exclusively to a subjective domain, for it will be the stylized relation to the demand upon it. And the style will be critical to the extent that, as style, it is not fully determined in advance, it incorporates a contingency over time that marks the

limits to the ordering capacity of the field in question. So the stylization of this "will" will produce a subject who is not readily knowable under the established rubric of truth. More radically, Foucault pronounces: "Critique would essentially insure the desubjugation [*désassujetiisement*] of the subject in the context [*le jeu*]
of what we could call, in a word, the politics of truth." (32, 39)

The politics of truth pertains to those relations of power that circumscribe in advance what will and will not count as truth, which order the world in certain regular and regulatable ways, and which we come to accept as the given field of knowledge. We can understand the salience of this point when we begin to ask: What counts as a person? What counts as a coherent gender? What qualifies as a citizen? Whose world is legitimated as real? Subjectively, we ask: Who can I become in such a world where the meanings and limits of the subject are set out in advance for me? By what norms am I constrained as I begin to ask what I may become? And what happens when I begin to become that for which there is no place within the given regime of truth? Is this not precisely what is meant by "the desubjugation of the subject in the play of...the politics of truth"(my translation)?

At stake here is the relation between the limits of ontology and epistemology, the link between the limits of what I might become and the limits of what I might risk knowing. Deriving a sense of critique from Kant, Foucault poses the question that is the question of critique itself: "Do you know up to what point you can know?" "Our liberty is at stake." Thus, liberty emerges at the limits of what one can know, at the very moment in which the desubjugation of the subject within the politics of truth takes place, the moment where a certain questioning practice begins that takes the following form: "'What, therefore, am I', I who belong to

this humanity, perhaps to this piece of it, at this point in time, at this instant of humanity which is subjected to the power of truth in general and truths in particular?"(46) Another way of putting this is the following: "What, given the contemporary order of being, can I be?" If, in posing this question, liberty is at stake, it may be that staking liberty has something to do with what Foucault calls virtue, with a certain risk that is put into play through thought and, indeed, through language where the contemporary ordering of being is brought to its limit.

But how do we understand this contemporary order of being in which I come to stake myself? Foucault chooses here to characterize this historically conditioned order of being in a way that links him with the critical theory of the Frankfurt school, identifying "rationalization" as the governmentalizing effect on ontology. Allying himself with a Left critical tradition post-Kant, Foucault writes,

> From the Hegelian Left to the Frankfurt School, there has been a complete critique of positivism, rationalization, of techne and technicalization, a whole critique of the relationships between the fundamental project of science and techniques whose objective was to show the connections between science's naive presumptions, on one hand, and the forms of domination characteristic of contemporary society, on the other. (39)

In his view, rationalization takes a new form when it comes into the service of bio-power. And what continues to be difficult for most social actors and critics within this situation is to discern the relationship between "rationalization and power."(39) What appears to be a merely epistemic order, a way of ordering the world, does not readily admit of the constraints by which that ordering takes

place. Nor does it eagerly show the way in which the intensification and totalization of rationalizing effects leads to an intensification of power. Foucault asks, "How is it that rationalization leads to the furor of power?"(42) Clearly, the capacity for rationalization to reach into the tributaries of life not only characterizes modes of scientific practice, "but also social relationships, state organizations, economic practices and perhaps even individual behaviors?"(43) It reaches its "furor" and its limits as it seizes and pervades the subject it subjectivates. Power sets the limits to what a subject can "be," beyond which it no longer "is," or it dwells in a domain of suspended ontology. But power seeks to constrain the subject through the force of coercion, and the resistance to coercion consists in the stylization of the self at the limits of established being.

One of the first tasks of critique is to discern the relation "between mechanisms of coercion and elements of knowledge." (50) Here again we seem confronted with the limits of what is knowable, limits which exercise a certain force without being grounded in any necessity, limits which can only be tread or interrogated by risking a certain security within an available ontology:

> [N]othing can exist as an element of knowledge if, on the one hand, it ...does not conform to a set of rules and constraints characteristic, for example, of a given type of scientific discourse in a given period, and if, on the other hand, it does not possess the effects of coercion or simply the incentives peculiar to what is scientifically validated or simply rational or simply generally accepted, etc. (52)

He then continues to show that knowledge and power are not finally separable, but work together to establish a set of subtle and explicit criteria for thinking the world: "It is therefore not a matter

of describing what knowledge is and what power is and how one would repress the other or how the other would abuse the one, but rather, a nexus of knowledge-power has to be described so that we can grasp what constitutes the acceptability of a system." (52-53)

The critic thus has a double task, to show how knowledge and power work to constitute a more or less systematic way of ordering the world with its own "conditions of acceptability of a system," but also "to follow the breaking points which indicate its emergence." So not only is it necessary to isolate and identify the peculiar nexus of power and knowledge that gives rise to the field of intelligible things, but also to track the way in which that field meets its breaking point, the moments of its discontinuities, the sites where it fails to constitute the intelligibility for which it stands. What this means is that one looks both for the conditions by which the object field is constituted, but also for the limits of those conditions, the moments where they point up their contingency and their transformability. In Foucault's terms, "schematically speaking, we have perpetual mobility, essential fragility or rather the complex interplay between what replicates the same process and what transforms it." (58)

Indeed, another way to talk about this dynamic within critique is to say that rationalization meets its limits in desubjugation. 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.

Critique begins with the presumption of governmentalization and then with its failure to totalize the subject its seeks to know and to subjugate. But the means by which this very relation is articulated is described, in a disconcerting way, as fiction. Why would it be

fiction? And in what sense is it fiction? Foucault refers to "an historical-philosophical practice [in which] one had to make one's own history, fabricate history, as if through fiction [*de faire comme par fiction*], in terms of how it would be traversed by the question of the relationships between structures of rationality which articulate true discourse and the mechanisms of subjugation which are linked to it." (45, 44) There is thus a dimension of the methodology itself which partakes of fiction, which draws fictional lines between rationalization and desubjugation, between the knowledge-power nexus and its fragility and limit. We are not told what sort of fiction this will be, but it seems clear that Foucault is drawing on Nietzsche and, in particular, the kind of fiction that genealogy is said to be.

You may remember that although it seems that for Nietzsche the genealogy of morals is the attempt to locate the origins of values, he is actually seeking to find out how the very notion of the origin became instituted. And the means by which he seeks to explain the origin is fictional. He tells a fable of the nobles, another about a social contract, another about a slave revolt in morality, and yet another about creditor and debtor relations. None of these fables can be located in space or time, and any effort to try to find the historical complement to Nietzsche's genealogies will necessarily fail. Indeed, in the place of an account that finds the origin to values or, indeed, the origin of the origin, we read fictional stories about the way that values are originated. A noble says something is the case and it becomes the case: the speech act inaugurates the value, and becomes something like an atopical and atemporal occasion for the origination of values. Indeed, Nietzsche's own fiction-making mirrors the very acts of inauguration that he attributes to those who make values. So he not only describes that

process, but that description becomes an instance of value-production, enacting the very process that it narrates.

How would this particular use of fiction relate to Foucault's notion of critique? Consider that Foucault is trying to understand the possibility of desubjugation within rationalization without assuming that there is a source for resistance that is housed in the subject or maintained in some foundational mode. Where does resistance come from? Can it be said to be the upsurge of some human freedom shackled by the powers of rationalization? If he speaks, as he does, of a will *not* to be governed, how are we to understand the status of that will?

In response to a query along these lines, he remarks

> I do not think that the will not to be governed at all is something that one could consider an originary aspiration (*je ne pense pas en effet que la volonté de n'être pas gouverné du tout soit quelque chose que l'on puisse considérer comme une aspiration originaire)*. I think that, in fact, the will not to be governed is always the will not to be governed thusly, like that, by these people, at this price. (72)

He goes on to warn against the absolutizing of this will that philosophy is always tempted to perform. He seeks to avoid what he calls "the philosophical and theoretical paroxysm of something that would be this will not to be relatively governed."(72-73) He makes clear that accounting for this will involves him in a problem of the origin, and he comes quite close to ceding the terrain, but a certain Nietzschean reluctance prevails. He writes,

> I was not referring to something that would be a fundamental anarchism, that would be like an originary

> freedom (*qui serait comme la liberté originaire*), absolutely and wholeheartedly (*absolument et en son fond)* resistant to any governmentalization. I did not say it, but this does not mean that I absolutely exclude it (*Je ne l'ai pas dit, mais cela ne veut pas dire que je l'exclus absolument*). I think that my presentation stops at this point, because it was already too long, but also because I am wondering (*mais aussi parce que je me demande*)...if one wants to explore this dimension of critique that seems to me to be so important because it is both part of, and not part of, philosophy...it is supported by something akin (*qui serait ou)* to the historical practice of revolt, the non-acceptance of a real government, on one hand, or, on the other, the individual refusal of governmentality."(72-73, 59)

Whatever this is that one draws upon as one resists governmentalization will be "*like* an originary freedom" and "something *akin to* the historical practice of revolt" (my emphasis). Like them, indeed, but apparently not quite the same. As for Foucault's mention of "originary freedom," he offers and withdraws it at once. "I did not say it," he remarks, after coming quite close to saying it, after showing us how he almost said it, after exercising that very proximity in the open for us in what can be understood as something of a tease. What discourse nearly seduces him here, subjugating him to its terms? And how does he draw from the very terms that he refuses? What art form is this in which a nearly collapsible critical distance is performed for us? And is this the same distance that informs the practice of wondering, of questioning? What limits of knowing does he dare to broach as he wonders out loud for us? The inaugural scene of critique involves *"the art* of voluntary insubordination," and the voluntary or, indeed,

"originary freedom" is given here, but in the form of a conjecture, in a form of art that suspends ontology and brings us into the suspension of disbelief.

Foucault finds a way to say "originary freedom," and I suppose that it gives him great pleasure to utter these words, pleasure and fear. He speaks them, but only through staging the words, relieving himself of an ontological commitment, but releasing the words themselves for a certain use. Does he refer to originary freedom here? Does he seek recourse to it? Has he found the well of originary freedom and drunk from it? Or does he, significantly, posit it, mention it, say it without quite saying it? Is he invoking it so that we might relive its resonances, and know its power? The staging of the term is not its assertion, but we might say that the assertion is staged, rendered artfully, subjected to an ontological suspension, precisely so it might be spoken. And that it is this speech act, the one which for a time relieves the phrase, "originary freedom," from the epistemic politics within which it lives which also performs a certain desubjugation of the subject within the politics of truth. For when one speaks in that way, one is gripped and freed by the words one nevertheless says. Of course, politics is not simply a matter of speaking, and I do not mean to rehabilitate Aristotle in the form of Foucault (although, I confess, that such a move intrigues me, and I mention it here to offer it as a possibility without committing myself to it at once). In this verbal gesture toward the end of his lecture, a certain freedom is exemplified, not by the reference to the term without any foundational anchor, but by the artful performance of its release from its usual discursive constraints, from the conceit that one might only utter it knowing in advance what its anchor must be.

Foucault's gesture is oddly brave, I would suggest, for it knows that it cannot ground the claim of original freedom. This not knowing

permits for the particular use it has within his discourse. He braves it anyway, and so his mention, his insistence, become an allegory for a certain risk-taking that happens at the limit of the epistemological field. And this becomes a practice of virtue, perhaps, and not, as his critics profess, a sign of moral despair, precisely to the extent that the practice of this kind of speaking posits a value which it does not know how to ground or to secure for itself, posits it anyway, and thereby shows that a certain intelligibility exceeds the limits on intelligibility that power-knowledge has already set. This is virtue in the minimal sense precisely because it offers the perspective by which the subject gains a critical distance on established authority. But it is also an act of courage, acting without guarantees, risking the subject at the limits of its ordering. Who would Foucault be if he were to utter such words? What desubjugation does he perform for us with this utterance?

To gain a critical distance from established authority means for Foucault not only to recognize the ways in which the coercive effects of knowledge are at work in subject-formation itself, but to risk one's very formation as a subject. Thus, in "The Subject and Power,"[8] Foucault will claim "this form of power [that] applies itself to immediate, everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him."(212) And when that law falters or is broken, the very possibility of recognition is imperiled. So when we ask how we might say "originary freedom," and say it in the wondering, we also put into question the subject who is said to be rooted in that term, releasing it, paradoxically, for a venture which might actually give the term new substance and possibility.

In concluding, I would simply return to the introduction to *The Use of Pleasure* where Foucault defines the practices that concern him, the "arts of existence" (10), as having to do with a cultivated relation of the self to itself. This kind of formulation brings us closer to the strange sort of virtue that Foucault's antifoundationalism comes to represent. Indeed, as I wrote earlier, when he introduces the notion of "arts of existence," Foucault also refers to such arts of existence as producing subjects who "seek to transform themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an oeuvre." We might think that this gives support to the charge that Foucault has fully aestheticized existence at the expense of ethics, but I would suggest only that he has shown us that there can be no ethics, and no politics, without recourse to this singular sense of poiesis. The subject who is formed by the principles furnished by the discourse of truth is not yet the subject who endeavors to form itself. Engaged in "arts of existence," this subject is both crafted and crafting, and the line between how it is formed, and how it becomes a kind of forming, is not easily, if ever drawn. For it is not the case that a subject is formed and then turns around and begins suddenly to form itself. On the contrary, the formation of the subject is the institution of the very reflexivity that indistinguishably assumes the burden of formation. The "indistinguishability" of this line is precisely the juncture where social norms intersect with ethical demands, and where both are produced in the context of a self-making which is never fully self-inaugurated.

Although Foucault refers quite straightforwardly to intention and deliberation in this text, he also lets us know how difficult it will be to understand this self-stylization in terms of any received understanding of intention and deliberation. For an understanding of the revision of terms that his usage requires, Foucault introduces

the terms, “modes of subjection or subjectivation.” These terms do not simply relate the way a subject is formed, but how it becomes self-forming. This becoming of an ethical subject is not a simple matter of self-knowledge or self-awareness; it denotes a “process in which the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice.” The self delimits itself, and decides on the material for its self-making, but the delimitation that the self performs takes place through norms which are, indisputably, already in place. Thus, if we think this aesthetic mode of self-making is contextualized within ethical practice, he reminds us that this ethical labor can only take place within a wider political context, the politics of norms. He makes clear that there is no self-forming outside of a mode of subjectivation, which is to say, there is no self-forming outside of the norms that orchestrate the possible formation of the subject. (28)

We have moved quietly from the discursive notion of the subject to a more psychologically resonant notion of “self,” and it may be that for Foucault the latter term carries more agency than the former. The self forms itself, but it forms itself within a set of formative practices that are characterized 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 compelled to form itself, but to form itself within forms that are already more or less in operation and underway. Or, one might say, it is compelled to form itself within practices that are more or less in place. But if that selfforming is done in disobedience to the principles by which one is formed, then virtue becomes the practice by which the self forms itself in desubjugation, which is to say that it risks its deformation as a subject, occupying that ontologically insecure position which poses the question anew: who will be a

subject here, and what will count as a life, a moment of ethical questioning which requires that we break the habits of judgment in favor of a riskier practice that seeks to yield artistry from constraint.

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[2] Raymond Williams, *Keywords*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 75-76.

[3] Theodor W. Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society" in *Prisms*, (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1984), 30.

[4] Michel Foucault, "What is Critique?" in *The Politics of Truth*, eds. Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth, (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997), transcript by Monique Emery, revised by Suzanne Delorme, et al., translated into English by Lysa Hochroth. This essay was originally a lecture given at the French Society of Philosophy on 27 May 1978, subsequently published in *Bulletin de la Société française de la philosophie* 84:2 (1990) 35-63; 21

[5] For an interesting account of this transition from critical theory to a theory of communicative action, see Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 1-13.

[6] Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality, Volume Two* (New York: Pantheon Press, 1985).

[7] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume One* (New York: Random House, 1978).

[8] Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power" in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, eds., *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 208-228.