

NIETZSCHE AND FOUCAULT ON SELF-CREATION: TWO DIFFERENT PROJECTS

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Abstract

This paper aims to highlight some major differences between the ethics of “self-becoming”, as it was sketched by Friedrich Nietzsche, and the so-called “aesthetics of existence”, which was developed in Michel Foucault’s late work. Although the propinquity between the two authors is a commonplace in Foucauldian exegesis, my claim is that the two projects of self-creation are dissimilar in four relevant aspects. To support my thesis I will use Foucault’s four-part ethical framework through which I will analyze each of the two projects.

Keywords: Foucault, Nietzsche, self-creation, will to power, aesthetics of existence, ethical substance, mode of subjectification, ethical work, ethical *telos*, power relations.

Everyone who is familiar with the academic commentaries on Michel Foucault’s work can see the huge number of scholars who draw a lineage between the French thinker and Friedrich Nietzsche. The propinquity between the two authors is a commonplace in Foucauldian exegesis, and this happens for obvious reasons. First and foremost, there is a Nietzschean legacy, which Foucault directly reclaimed it or, at least, did not wish to reject. Such an influence is largely visible in Foucault’s genealogical insights, in his perspectivist account of truth, in his reflections on power, and – arguably, most of all – in his conviction that philosophy is not a disengaged body of knowledge, but rather a committed and sometimes even a painful activity. Following Nietzsche,

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Foucault believed that philosophy is a matter of personal experience, which entails the unity between theory and practice. This conviction was made clear especially in Foucault's last interviews and writings, a period which coincided with his reflections on the aesthetics of existence and the problem of subjectivity. These "problematizations" are precisely one of the main reasons that make almost every scholar to connect Foucault with Nietzsche.

However, in this article I want to propose another picture of the late Foucault, by emphasizing some major differences between Foucault and Nietzsche with respect to the problem of self-creation. Although I am familiar with the similarities between the two philosophers, my claim is that Nietzsche and Foucault engaged in two different projects of self-creation. One major and obvious distinction lies in the radically opposed aims of self-creation. Whereas for Nietzsche, the purpose was the enhancement of life and creativity of strong individuals to the inevitable detriment of those weak and vulnerable, for Foucault, the purpose was, conversely, to give the fragile and vulnerable subject a weapon of resistance against domination. But, besides this conspicuous opposite purposes, my claim is that Nietzsche and Foucault are holding distinct outlooks on self-creation in terms of the "ethical substance", the "mode of subjectification", and the "ethical work" involved in their ethics.

With this, I come to my methodological framework, which I will borrow from Foucault himself, who investigated ethics through a fourfold model of the relation of the self to itself. I will use the same methodological tool myself and I will place both of Foucault's and Nietzsche's ideas within this ethical framework, in order to highlight what I consider to be the major differences between them.

Methodological Preliminaries

In the beginning of the second volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault turns away from the traditional approaches of ethics, focused on the moral assessment of actions. After distinguishing between ethics and moral codes, he analyzes four aspects of ethics, which – for Foucault – is an encompassing term that designates the relationship one has with oneself.

The first aspect discussed by the French philosopher is *the determination of the ethical substance* (Foucault 1985, 26-27). This aspect corresponds to a formal or an “ontological” element, which refers to a specific part of the subject that requires ethical care. In the history of ethics, we can find different ethical substances that engaged moral “problematization”. For instance, the ancient Greeks thought the ethical substance was “the use of pleasures” (*aphrodisia*), and their task was to notice their risks and look for a state of temperance. The Christians believed the ethical substance was the “desires of the flesh”, and that entailed the possibility of committing sins in ones heart (see Mt. 5:28). For a philosopher like Kant, the ethical substance was typified by the intentions that drive human actions.

The next aspect of the relation of the self to itself is *the mode of subjectification* (1985, 27), and this is the material or the “deontological” element of ethics. The question at stake here is: how does a subject relate to a set of prescriptions and to that part of itself, which is determined as the ethical substance? Or, to put it simply, why does a person has to follow a set of rules? The mode of subjectification refers to the manner in which an individual accepts to comply with a rule, and he is justified to think that his acts are morally valuable. Returning to the history of ethics, we could see that, for the Greeks, the mode of subjectification was the choice of a free man to lead a noble life, pursuant to the principles of self-mastership. This is the reason why, in Ancient Greece, the ethics was far stricter than the moral code. Whereas the moral code had fewer prescriptions, the ethical life of a Greek had much more self-regulations. For a Christian, the mode of subjectification involves the observance of God’s commandments or submission to the love of God. In Kantian ethics, the mode of subjectification refers to the “respect for the law” (*Achtung für das Gesetz*).

The third aspect of ethics is *the ethical work* (1985, 27) and this is the “ascetic” element of the relation to oneself. (The ethical work is not “ascetic” in the Christian meaning, but in its ancient, Greek one. The point is not that it necessarily leads to monastic asceticism, but that it is an *askēsis*, i.e. a work, an effort, a practice.) The ethical work is also referred to as the “forms of elaborations of the self”. The issues stake here are: what is the set of means by which the subject can become

morally valuable? How does one train oneself in order to fulfill his ethical purposes? These interrogations target the practices of the self by virtue of which a person can attain a certain “spiritual” state (i.e. an ethical *telos*). These self-techniques

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. (Foucault 1988a, 18)

With other occasions, Foucault reflected upon most of the self-techniques present in Greek and Roman culture: the examination of conscience, the dialogue, the meditation, the *hypomnemata* and so on. Later on, several of these ancient techniques were assumed by Christian culture, and were modified to suit Christianity’s spiritual aims. (For instance, the examination of conscience was practiced in the Christian culture as self-decipherment, a tool for identifying the “evil” that is harboring in oneself.)

The last aspect of ethics, identified by Foucault, is the *teleology of the moral subject* or, simply, the *telos* (1985, 27-28). Foucault claimed that an action is not commendable in itself, but only as integrated into a larger structure, which is the entire ethical conduct or the life of a subject. This is the reason why each ethics has an end or a *telos*. Every action tends to settle a particular way of life. As in the case of the other three elements, the teleology of the moral subject underwent significant historical changes. The ancient Greeks thought the stake of the ethical work was to attain complete mastership over the self. For the Roman aristocrats, the end of moral life was to reach a state of independence from the everyday needs and pleasures. For Christians, the *telos* of ethics was salvation, namely the eternal life in the Kingdom of Heavens. We may easily see that, of all these ends, the Christian one is the most promising. And Foucault suggestion – even if not expressed as such – was that in the name of the most generous ideal, Western conduct became stricter and stricter, leading to the “juridification of morality”. This process did not stop in the twilight of the Middle Ages, but continued during modern period. (Nica 2015b)

In what follows next, I will deal separately with the two projects, by putting each of the two self-creation projects within this framework sketched above. First, I will analyze the Nietzschean account of self-fashioning and, then, I will analyze the Foucauldian account of the aesthetics of existence, insisting upon the differences between him and the German philosopher.

The Four-Element Framework Applied to Nietzsche's Ethics of Self-Creation

Probably the best way to start with Nietzsche's ethics of self-creation is to show the manner in which the German thinker deconstructed "the soul-hypothesis". One of the main attacks against this hypothesis is by rejecting the traditional idea of a "free will". For Nietzsche, such an idea is "the best self-contradiction that has been conceived so far... a sort of rape and perversion of logic" (BGE 21). The presupposition of free will is that the human being is a God-like creature, which can be his own cause. But no real thing is its own cause, that is why for Nietzsche,

freedom of the will in the superlative metaphysical sense... the desire to bear the entire and ultimate responsibility for one's actions oneself, and to absolve God, the world, ancestors, chance, and society involves nothing less than to be precisely this *causa sui* and...to pull oneself up into existence by the hair, out of the swamps of nothingness. (BGE 21)

Nietzsche repudiates the idea that humans are absolutely free or that the self has a substantial existence, and draws attention upon the natural, social and historical contingencies that shape a person's identity. To put it simply, what Nietzsche repudiates is the existence of a Kantian "agency", which makes the individual totally accountable for all his actions. One of the underlying assumptions of the agency-idea is that the human subject has a unity, an essence and an ontological substrate that makes a man what he is. But Nietzsche insists that "there is no such substrate; there is no « being » behind the doing, acting, becoming. « The doer » is merely made up and added into the action – the act is

everything:" (GM I 13). What Nietzsche does here is to invert the classical picture of action theory: it is not the subject that is making an action, but rather the action is that making a subject. This attack upon the old theory of action is a significant part of a larger assault against the traditional metaphysics of identity. The German philosopher suggests that what is usually called "reality" does not have an immovable identity or a true essence, so we shouldn't speak of entities as unities. All entities are, for Nietzsche, "unities only as dynamic systems" (Shacter 1992, 270). Each and every thing in the world is nothing but an aggregation of accidents, and each thing is further caught up in a system of relations, differences and contingencies. The world is nothing but a network of relations and accidents, which makes a thing to be "the sum of its effects" (WP 557). And, if we follow Alexander Nehamas' suggestion (1985, 25), this is precisely the broad meaning of the *will to power*. In this sense, the will to power is an impersonal force that permeates the entire universe, an activity of perpetual reconfiguration of opposed energies and forces (WP §1067). This image of the world as nothing but an interplay of energies rejects the Kantian concept of thing-in-itself, and this is what makes a thing to be the sum of its effects:

The properties of a thing are effects on other *things*: if one removes other *things*, then a thing has no properties, i.e. there is *no thing* without other things, i.e. *no thing-in-itself*. (WP §557)

And, if a thing is the sum of its effects, then the human individual is the sum of his acts, since a person's effects are precisely his acts. I hope this clarifies the statement I made earlier that, for Nietzsche, the action is that which makes an individual, and not the other way around. An individual's identity represents the totality of his acts, namely the way by which he takes himself as a project to be carried in a lifetime. But even though all entities have a contingent and unstable existence, human being does not bear the same looseness in self-transformation. When we speak of human identity, we should be careful in noticing the difficulty of an individual's becoming. In the case of human existence, there are two manners by which a person may attain a form; or, to put it otherwise, there are two identity patterns. These two identity patterns

refer to the famous Nietzschean notions of “slave” and “master”. The former is that of blind compliance to the code of social rules and values. Through blind compliance, the human becomes a “slave”, namely a subject trapped in the snare of ready-made values. Since, for Nietzsche, society is a “dark workshop” programmed to “fabricate ideals” (GM I, 14), the observance of impersonal rules is a sign of weakness, not of real responsibility. And since the human being is the sum of her acts, then the “slave” is the sum of her resignations and submissions. At the opposite side, stands the master. His way of shaping an identity is self-creation, which is an attribute of the “free spirits” (*freie Geister*). A free spirit, a creative individual does not passively embrace an identity, but he builds one of his own. He is the “master”, the one who creates values and, by that, he creates himself. His desire is the spiritualization of existence, by setting a new taste and giving himself a new and personal rule of self-government. Nietzsche’s famous formula for the people who want to create themselves is: “Become who you are!”, so we can characterize his ethics as an ethics of self-becoming:

We, however, want to become who we are – human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves! (GS §335)

This phrase captures, in short, the entire stakes and development of Nietzsche’s project of self-creation. In what follows, I will present how Nietzsche’s project fits within the four-part framework. But in order to do this, I must first clarify Nietzsche’s famous exigency of becoming what/who we are.

If one has to become what he is, then it would seem that the outcome of this process is the “real Self”, an unconcealed nucleus of one’s true identity. It would mean that the self must be somehow disclosed or revealed. In such conditions, it would not be the case of self-creation, but only of self-discovery (which is more a Platonic or a Christian theme). Nietzsche is, as we know, extremely ambiguous. Nevertheless, we can partially unravel this enigmatic phrase, by pointing to Heidegger (1979, 7), who claimed that “for Nietzsche, Being is becoming”. Given this hint, the utterance “become who you are”

should be assumed as an urge to intensify the becoming. If we replace “being” with “becoming” in Nietzsche’s phrase, then “Man must become who he is” should be understood as “man must become becoming”. Therefore, Nietzsche’s phrase is not a celebration of “being”, but an engagement towards “becoming”. But considering that reality is already “becoming”, namely the confrontation of energies and impulses, Nietzsche’s advice must be understood, in the first place, as the following recommendation: one has to assume the multiplicity of impulses and forces that constitutes one’s biology. In this interpretation, Nietzsche’s exigency urges the individual to recognize the plurality of inner voices and tendencies that constitutes him at one point in his life. In contradistinction to the Platonic and Christian tradition that unify the subject around powerful concepts like “reason” or “soul”, Nietzsche rejects the so-called human nature or the essence of man. The subject is multiplicity (WP §641) and one of the fundamental stakes of historical thinking is to point out that human being has “not an immortal soul but many mortal souls to shelter in himself” (HAH §218). Human being is not a homogeneous entity, but a plurality of instincts. “The subject as multiplicity” is the name for the real individual, the one who is made out of numerous clusters of conflicting energies, drives and forces.

Returning now to the four-level framework, the instincts represent, in Nietzsche’s ethics, the ethical substance. The part which requires specific ethical care is precisely this plurality of opposing energies. And, for Nietzsche, is clear that a man is nothing as long as he *is* an uncultivated multiplicity, or as long as he *acts* according to all these conflicting instincts (WP §108). My claim is that Nietzsche’s self-becoming is a two-steps process. The first one corresponds to the subject’s awareness that he does not have a single nature and that his identity is scattered in a multitude of contradictory drives. The second step corresponds to the individual’s strive for unification of these drives into a coherent attitude. Nietzsche’s master is the one who has the capacity to structure all the conflicting impulses. This task is to be done in two different ways: either as an enhancement of a single instinct, which determine the ethical attitude itself, or as a rearrangement of energies, which form a new and harmonious cluster of instincts.

The picture I wish to propose for this natural state of instincts is that of a “puzzle without solution” (Nica 2015a). Let us imagine a puzzle, whose final picture is not available and, furthermore, there are no hints that the puzzle could be solved. A puzzle like this is not presumed to have been designed by someone. In such conditions, nobody knows how the final picture could possibly look like, and all the pieces appear to be nothing but a heap of irreconcilable fragments. I think this situation is the perfect illustration for the state of instincts in Nietzsche’s philosophy. The absent designer is the dead God, and the pieces of the puzzle are the human instincts, floating in perpetual conflict. But all the contradictory instincts are brought under a state of harmony and perfection through the activity of a free spirit. We can say that, at the end of the process, the self in Nietzsche’s philosophy must to appear as “an ordered clotting of contrasts”.

To resume the analysis of the first element of the framework, the material aspect of Nietzsche’s ethics of self-becoming is the constellation of drives, which are – commonly – struggling in a state of entropy. Using Foucault’s terminology, we might say that the ethical “problematization” in Nietzsche’s philosophy is the totality of instincts. One’s impulses, drives and energies are object of ethical concern and they are transformed in the master’s ethical work.

The second element of the ethical framework is the mode of subjectification, which for Nietzsche is the self’s engagement to give itself a law. The answer to the question “why should a person be committed to the ethics of self-becoming?” is: because he has given himself a law that is his own. The thing at stake here is the character of “ownness” that a law has:

Can you give yourself your own evil and your own good and hang your own will over yourself as a law? Can you be your own judge and avenger of your law? Terrible it is to be alone with the judge and avenger of one’s own law. Thus is a star thrown out into the void and into the icy breath of solitude. (Z I, 17)

The “icy breath of solitude” which Nietzsche mentions is the crucial mark of self-becoming that delineates his ethics from Kant’s ethical project. We will not find in Nietzsche a transcendental and

universal subject, which gives itself a law as it would give it to the entire humankind. Whereas Kant purports that the righteous person is the one who had repressed all his instincts (G 4, 394-401), Nietzsche believes that the instincts are the primary tools of self-realization. Furthermore, the law that the free spirit has given to himself is not a universal law, but a particular law of inclinations. That is why the task of reason, in Nietzsche's philosophy, is not to suppress the instincts. If reason has a function at all, this would be to distinguish between the life-enhancement inclinations and the life-diminution ones. The joy of life is one of the fundamental features of Nietzsche's ethics of self-becoming. However, this affirmation of life should not be comprehended as a mere indulgence in pleasure. For the German thinker, self-fulfillment is not about the complacency of a self-indulgent person. The depraved man, who devotes his life to all possible pleasures, is nothing but a slave, since his attitude is shaped by an undifferentiated obedience to bodily needs. The free spirit, the Overman is the master of his own sensations, and this distinguishes him from the members of the "herd". An important aspect that must be noticed, when speaking of Nietzsche's mode of subjectification, is the ultra-individualistic and elitist character of his ethics. Another way to answer the question "Why should I cultivate a certain ethical attitude" would, arguably, be: "I should fashion myself because I want to be different than the ordinary people". I will return later to this aspect.

The third aspect of ethics is the ethical work upon the self. The question is how a subject could transform itself into an ethical subject or, more simple, *how* does one fulfill his ethical goal. I have stated above that, in Nietzsche's philosophy, the harmonization of instincts is not feasible as an uncritical seeking of pleasures. The ethical transformation requires a specific discipline that entails us to talk about a sort of secular asceticism. When Nietzsche refers to self-creation, he suggests that it is unachievable without self-discipline. To this respect, he brings forth the exemplary figure of Goethe, who "disciplined himself to wholeness, he created himself" (TI 9, 49). The cultivation of self-discipline can be best described as a project of character stylization:

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. (GS §290)

The activity of stylizing one's character is the ascetic process, which separates the masters from the slaves. The free spirit exercises his freedom as an act of self-fashioning, operating upon himself a number of abstentions and constraints. In these constraints, he does not feel any encumbrance; on the contrary, he "enjoy[s] the finest gaiety in such constraint" (GS §290). On the other hand, the small members of the "herd" are incapable of self-discipline. They either comply with an impersonal code of conduct or they submit to each and every pleasure. We are talking here about two ways of submission, being that to common morality or to desires. The latter is the person incapable to commit to a certain discipline. As Nietzsche says, "the weak characters without power over themselves *hate* the constraint of style" (GS §290).

The fourth element of the framework is the teleology of the moral subject or, simply, the *telos*. In Nietzsche's project of self-becoming, the aim of ethical work is to become "new, unique and incomparable" (GS §335). The one who has become himself is the individual who imposes new values to the world. In the narrow sense, the will to power is nothing but the ability to create innovative meanings, to establish new interpretations. The world does not consist of facts, but only of interpretations (WP §481), and the hallmark of the higher individual is his capacity to proliferate novel interpretations, which surpass and challenge common understanding. His aim is both self-overcoming and the overcoming of others. Nietzsche's ethics is an elitist project of the individual who has risen above the "herd". The ethical subject that reached its *telos* is Zarathustra, who stays beyond common standards, and says: "This is now my way: where is yours?" (Z III, 11). This is a provocative question, which not only that it challenges everyone to self-overcoming, but especially it stresses the difference between the master and the slave. The inevitable outcome of Nietzsche's ethics is a person who highlights his own excellence, and transforms everyone else into remote human beings.

The Four-Element Framework Applied to Foucault's Aesthetics of Existence

In this section I will introduce Foucault's idea of the aesthetics of existence and I will frame it within his ethical fourfold.

The premises of Foucault's aesthetics of existence are the same with Nietzsche's account of self-creation. Foucault rejects the traditional idea of a substantial self, endowed with a transcendental or a transcendent dimension. As C.G. Prado states "basic to [Foucault's] work is the idea that subjectivity is a complex product rather than a preexisting condition" (Prado 2000, 10). The subject is not something given, and it is not a necessary condition either. But, if the subject is not given, then it is produced. The intellectual project Foucault carried through entire life was to show how the subject was constituted in history. Therefore, we should note that Foucault's interest on subjectivity is not only a late research focus, but it was his major and constant preoccupation. His crucial concern was to develop an account of subjectivity by answering some questions regarding the emergence of the subject in history. A brief answer, that covers all the stages of Foucault's work, would be that the subject emerges at the intersection of truth, power and self-techniques. These three elements correspond to the three periods of Foucault's philosophical activity:

My objective has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects. My work has dealt with three modes of objectification which transform human beings into subjects. The first is the modes of inquiry which try to give themselves the status of the sciences. In the second part of my work, I have studied the objectivising of the subject in what I shall call 'dividing practices...' Finally, I have sought to study it in my current work the way a human being turns him – or himself – into a subject. For example, I have chosen the domain of sexuality... Thus it is not power, but the subject; that is the general theme of my research. (Foucault 1982, 777)

The aesthetics of existence corresponds to his third stage of his work, when Foucault turned up to Greek Antiquity and found that, in that epoch, ethics was not a matter of assessing actions in terms of right and wrong, but a matter of self-fashioning. This insight gave Foucault

the chance to enlarge his previous analysis regarding the emergence of the self. Whereas in his early stages, the French thinker depicted a fragile self, entrapped in a pervasive system of power relations, in his later period, Foucault articulated the possibility of a self-constituting subject. The self is not only fabricated in the interplay of power relations, but it has resources of resistance (Foucault 1979, 95) and, for that matter, it has resources of self-creation. In order to create themselves, the individuals don't need to go back to Antiquity, but they have to invent new forms of subjectivity according to contemporary and future challenges (Foucault 1988b, 15). This does not mean that the individual is an absolute free agent, but rather that, within the game of power relations, there are always interstices that allow the subject to constitute itself. As C. Koopman states, Foucault's ethical project is "located at the hinge between a history of the formation of the subject and the possibility of future self-transformation of that subject" (Koopman 2013, 526). In this process of self-transformation, the individual has to displace the standard subjectivity and to stylize his life, until it becomes a work of art. Human life could be art creation too, as long as an individual brings his life under certain criteria of harmony and perfection:

What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. That art is something which is specialized or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life? (Foucault 1984b, 350)

This aestheticization of life is another aspect in which Foucault's ethics resembles the Nietzschean project of self-becoming. But the similarities between Nietzsche and Foucault stop here. In framing Foucauldian aesthetics of existence within the fourfold model of ethics, I will shed a light upon the major differences that appear between the two thinkers.

The first aspect of ethics is the determination of the ethical substance, which begs the question: "What part of the ethical subject requires ethical care?" There are at least two possible answers to this question. The first one, given by M. Huijer (1999, 71), is that feelings are the ethical substance in Foucault's aesthetics of existence. The second answer, given by T.O. Leary (2002, 107), is: the modes of subjectivities. I

will explain next why I think Huijer's solution is wrong. He supports his answer, by referring to one of Foucault's sayings from an interview with Dreyfuss and Rabinow. During the interview, Foucault said that, in our times, the part of ourselves which needs ethical care is our feelings. But what Foucault was referring to was not his own idea of a promising ethical substance. What Foucault did was only to acknowledge that, in Western society, the feelings are the main ethical field of inquiry. In the interview, he is rather ironic about this aspect. Here is the entire phrase from the interview:

For instance, you can say, in general, that in our society the main field of morality, the part of ourselves which is most relevant for morality, is our feelings. You can have a girl in the street or anywhere, if you have very good feelings toward your wife. (Foucault 1984, 352)

After this sentence, Foucault describes that Kant and the medieval Christians believed that the ethical substance were intentions and desires respectively. In my opinion, it is clear that Foucault is only giving some historical examples from which he is clearly detached.

Therefore, I think it is more plausible to say that the ethical substance in Foucault's aesthetics of existence is the one identified by O'Leary, namely the modes of subjectivity. The modes of subjectivity (not to be conflated with modes of subjectification) are ways in which an individual establish a relation with himself and with the others. They cover a wide range of forms, from sexual identity to more complex identifying beliefs. The forms of subjectivity entail ways of life that determine our modes of being, thinking, and acting, and as long as these modes become problematized, "they become the material, the substance, for an ethical intervention and transformation" (O'Leary 2002, 108).

The self, understood as the more or less homogenous coming together of our modes of subjectivity, has become the material, the substance of our ethical reflection and practice. It is the 'ethical substance' of the model Foucault proposes. (O'Leary 2002, 120)

It should be clear by now the fundamental difference between Nietzsche and Foucault regarding the material aspect of ethics. Whereas

Nietzsche believed the instincts were the ethical substance, Foucault problematizes the modes of subjectivity. We could express this significant difference by putting it in non-Foucauldian, yet more intuitive terms: on one hand, Nietzsche identifies the ethical substance as a “natural” feature; on the other, Foucault identifies the ethical substance as a “cultural” one.

The second element of the Foucault’s ethical framework is the mode of subjectification. This element refers to a formal or ontological aspect of ethics, and it calls for the reasons why somebody should be committed to a certain ethical attitude. O’Leary’s claim is that the aesthetics of existence is commendable, because otherwise a subject would be shapeless:

In the ethics that Foucault is formulating, the mode of subjection, that is the answer to the question ‘why should I live my life in one particular way, as opposed to any other?’, is: because myself and my life have no shape, no purpose, no justification, outside of the form which I give to them. It is, therefore, imperative (non-categorically imperative) that I think about that form, develop the techniques that will help me to transform it, and that I reflect upon the ends, the *telo*, to which I will direct it. (O’Leary 2002, 138)

Apparently, such an answer brings Foucault in the proximity of Nietzsche. The German philosopher would say as well that a shapeless life does not worth to be lived. The free spirit creates himself not only because he gives his own law, becoming his *own* master, but also because he wants to give a unique form to his life. It is no surprise that both O’Leary (2002, 136-137) and Huijer (1999, 75-76) are making extensive parallels between Foucault and Nietzsche. However, I think there is a little bit more to say about this matter. In the aesthetics of existence, Foucault does not simply longs for a form, but he wants to discover those modes of subjectivity, which could withstand biopolitical normalization. The aesthetics of existence is a practice of self-(trans)formation and, thereby, an act of political resistance against domination. An individual has to form and transform himself if he wants to resist those power relations that lead to domination. A shapeless subject is a subject which will receive an external and, possibly dangerous, identity. The uncultivated and unchanged individual is

extremely vulnerable to biopolitical mechanisms of discipline. The difference between Nietzsche and Foucault is that the French thinker's preoccupation is to articulate a hotbed of resistance for the otherwise fragile and vulnerable subjects.

The third element of ethics is the ethical work or the "forms of elaboration" of self. As stated before, this ascetic aspect refers to the actual practice or the set of exercises by virtue of which a subject can fulfill its ethical goals. Foucault analyzed the ethical work developed in Greek and Roman Antiquity. But what is the ethical work of Foucault's own ethical project? A very specific answer is given by James Bernauer (1990, 19), who argues that Foucault's ethical work is the method of genealogy. However, this is only a methodological instrument, and it is a little bit strange to reduce an entire ascetic activity to a scholarly tool. A proper ethical work should have more of an existential relevance. A comprehensive answer is suggested by Paul Rabinow, who claims that Foucault's ethical work consists in the critical activity in general. This is a more encompassing solution, and the readers of "What is Enlightenment?" will connect criticism with the "historical ontology of ourselves", which bears an existential significance:

We must obviously give a more positive content to what may be a philosophical ethos consisting in a critique of what we are saying, thinking, and doing, through a historical ontology of ourselves. (Foucault 1984d, 45)

However, inspired by the above quote, I suggest we could go beyond the critical activity, and say that the ethical work is philosophy itself. Not philosophy as a theoretical reflection or as body of knowledge, but precisely the philosophical ethos, namely philosophy as a way of life. This is an experimental mode of doing philosophy, which not only changes one's opinions or the reader's view about the world, but it is an experiment carried out by the author, who thus invites the reader to experience on himself. If it is written by a true practitioner of philosophy, a book changes not only his theoretical insights, but it displaces his own subjectivity. Here are two quotes from Foucault's interviews, relevant for this matter:

Reading a book or talking about a book was an exercise one surrendered to as it were for oneself in order to benefit from it, in order to transform oneself. (Foucault, 1985, 76-7, *apud* Huijjer 1999, 78)

The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning. If you knew when you began a book what you would say at the end, do you think that you would have the courage to write it? What is true for writing and for a love relationship is true also for life. (Foucault 1988a, 9)

The difference between Nietzsche and Foucault at this level is that whereas the former supports an affirmative and active philosophical life, the latter propose a reactive philosophical life. Nietzsche's ethics is informed by *amor fati*, whilst Foucault's aesthetics of existence is precisely a way of rejecting or eschewing certain situations, events or conditions. Although in real life Foucault was a vocal activist, his ethics represents a rather silent war against domination. He does not confront directly the establishment; instead he engages in a subversive and devious political project. And this is another important difference from Nietzsche. Unlike the philosophical life employed by Nietzsche, the Foucauldian aesthetics of existence is not only an ethics, but also a reactive way of doing politics.

The fourth element of the four-part framework is the *telos* of ethics, so we should finally ask ourselves what is the ethical aim of Foucault's aesthetics of existence. In a Nietzschean fashion, Bernauer (1990, 20) identifies the *telos* of Foucault's ethics as "a permanent provocation to the forces that war against our creativity". I tend to agree with Bernauer, when he says that the aim of Foucault's ethics is a fight against those forces that threaten "something" in us, but that "something" is not creativity in itself. Creativity is a mere effect of the ethical *telos* aimed at by the aesthetics of existence. To identify this goal, I return again to O'Leary, who argues that the purpose of ethics is freedom. It seems more plausible for me to say that freedom, rather than creativity is Foucault's ultimate goal, since freedom is the condition of creativity. The former is not only the condition of the latter, freedom is the very condition of possibility for self-creation or, as Foucault says, it is the "ontological condition of ethics" (Foucault 1987, 115). Here we may see another major difference between Nietzsche and Foucault. Although

Foucault rejects the humanist conception of a substantial self, in a manner similar to Nietzsche, Foucault maintains “a deep commitment to the idea of human freedom, thus distancing himself from Nietzsche” (Iftode 2013, 77). But how could ethics be both the condition and the end of ethics?

First of all, we should refrain ourselves to define Foucault’s notion of freedom in terms of an ideal or absolute freedom, as conceived by the humanist thinking. For the French thinker, freedom is “not an ideal state for which we strive, it is a condition of our striving” (2002, 159). It is not a transcendental property of the soul, but a dynamic condition, which is related to a certain configuration of power relations. To put it simply, freedom exists only in my contingent and rather narrow possibility to stand against a norm, an authority or a state of domination. This is freedom as the ontological condition of ethics. But, at the same time, freedom is also the *telos* of the aesthetics of existence, in so far as much the process of self-transformation aims at maintaining this limited and contingent possibility to oppose domination. A suggestive expression of Foucault’s idea of freedom is advanced by M. Huijer: “freeness as opposed to power” (Huijer 1999, 66). If a subject’s interactions are caught up within all kinds of games of power, then the task of the aesthetics of existence is to find ways which would “allow these games of power to be played with a minimum of domination” (Foucault 1987, 129). Thus, the minimization of domination becomes the “the point of articulation of the ethical preoccupation and of the political struggle for the respect of rights, of the critical reflection against the abusive techniques of government” (Foucault 1987, 130). It appears that the aesthetics of existence is a profoundly democratic project. I am not speaking of democracy in none of its technical meanings (most of which are tributary to the liberal humanist project), but of democracy in a broad sense, as the system that provides the lowest degree of domination and the highest degree of freedom for the most vulnerable people. And this is another matter, which marks a significant difference between Foucault’s and Nietzsche’s ethics.

It should be clear by now that, albeit the two accounts of self-creation bear some visible similarities, they are still remaining two relevantly different projects.

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