

Foucault and Complicity: Attributing an Ethics to the Subject-as-Spectacle

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Abstract

Is it still possible to see an act of violence and feel guilt? To feel a sense of complicity beyond social duty or desire?

There have been questions similar to this in discussion for centuries now, in fact, many of the systems of thought dedicated to answering it invoke entire metaphysical apparatuses to provide for its completion.

This one, however, is specific to our time. Is it even possible to feel guilt anymore? In an attempt to provide an outline of the ethical ramifications of complicity, this paper discusses the effects of Immanuel Kant on our present day understanding of violence and of ourselves. That is, there is none. Instead the shortcomings consist of an obfuscation of the dominant order and an obstruction of political action.

By continuing from the historical analysis of the subject begun by Michel Foucault in his early writing, coupled with his assessment of disciplinary power from his earlier writings, these difficulties may not only become apparent, but also an issue that may hold the potential for change. In this light, it may be possible to consider an ethics of the subject as spectacle and progress towards, or at least entertain, the idea of complicity.

Keywords: spectatorship, complicity, ethics, Michel Foucault, violence

At Republic 439e, Plato has Socrates tell us of Leontius, son of Aglaeon:

On his way up from the Piraeus outside the north wall, he noticed the bodies of some criminals lying on the ground, with the executioner standing by them. He wanted to go and look at them, but at the same time he was disgusted and tried to turn away. He struggled for some time and covered his eyes, but at last the desire was too much for him. Opening his eyes wide, he ran up to the bodies and cried, 'There you are, curse you, feast yourselves on this lovely sight'. (2003: 137)

Here is a man torn apart by his conflicting desires; his torment and anguish represented as a moral dilemma. It appears Leontius is caught up by his desire to view the bodies of the recently executed criminals, except he also wishes to maintain an acceptable decorum and attempts to resist the urge. His dilemma is complicated enough, yet how is it so simple for us to discern? His reaction tells us all; it may be his intention to observe 'justice in progress', yet by his action Leontius risks the label of a social deviant. It is in this issue alone that his circumstances are revealed, since all actions are committed to the judgement of the dominant order and his decision is wrought by the potential punishment that he may receive, or as Michel Foucault distinguishes it: an individual does not choose to be insane but has insanity thrust upon them. (2006: 56) For Slavoj Žižek this is the 'ought' and 'must' of power and politics for the subject under dominion. (2006: 49)

Hence the initial parameters that began our investigation are not shaped by intuition alone, but are formed by the question, 'How does Leontius regard his own actions?' In this manner we might represent the narrative thus:

- i. He is curious.
- ii. He is disgusted.
- iii. He struggles.
- iv. He approaches the bodies.
- v. He curses.

In doing so we leave a crucial element undisclosed; to begin we may consider Leontius as being fixed by opposing forces, caught in a mental to-ing and fro-ing before the stronger will wins out. By this we reveal the logic of his decision; except, it is not his own volition that Leontius regards as deviant, since in the schema of his struggle it is his eyes that are accorded an unruly will and he considers himself as a blameless victim.

It is his eyes that wish to look upon the bodies of the criminals, whereas Leontius is 'disgusted' and wont to 'turn away', even covering his face to prevent his involvement in the act. By this duality Leontius attempts to both commit the crime and to remain an innocent bystander; it may appear that Leontius represents the struggle as his own, yet it is apparent on his eventual approach to the bodies that he regards himself as a spectator of his own actions: he curses his eyes, for it is they that have led him to stoop to such activities.

It may be a conceit, but the fact Leontius believed he had no recourse in the matter is an important issue; in this way, we see him as a man with a decision already foreclosed against his own participation, since the dominant order has manipulated the values by which it is to be judged: his is a choice between conforming to the social will, or else losing his privileged position within its order. In presenting his unwanted desire as an external manifestation Leontius concedes to us the limited agency he considers himself to possess; that is, he does not labour over a moral decision but rather a struggle internal to the hegemonic order and hidden under the guise of an ethical dilemma. It is as Foucault suggested when he referred to the dominant system as being tolerable only if it masked a substantial portion of itself. (1998: 86)

If we consider those other actions that were available to Leontius, we begin to realise how much remains hidden: he might have protested against any further executions, or fought for the fair trial of future criminals; whatever his moral inclination, he could have followed it towards asserting his own action. Instead he is forced to submit to a decision that is divorced from his own concerns, where both choices relate to the dominant social will. It is his political action that is foreclosed.

Not able to conceive of his full potential Leontius represents for us a Kantian individual, one that believes the only ethical act is one that 'follows one's desire' and overlaps with 'one's duty.' (Žižek, 2008: 166) Yet we can have no assurance that this is the case; it may instead be that our duty is overwritten onto our desires, or vice versa. In fact, according to Žižek, it is Kant, 'driven by suspicion', who admits that we cannot ever be sure if what we did was truly ethical and not sustained by some secret motive. (2008: 166) (Here though, Žižek is to be taken with the utmost care. His is an assessment heavily dependent upon psychoanalysis; particularly arguments raised by Jacques Lacan in his essay 'Kant avec Sade'. In his approximation of the text Žižek sees Kant as the unequivocal, albeit unwitting emergent point of psychoanalytic thinking and distorts Kant accordingly). In his fear Kant 'commits an error'. As subjects under dominion we are divorced from our own moral teleology and left with no reason to intervene in a situation other than conformity to the social order.

This is the impasse: today, the dominant thought is a Kantian response to events that effectively declines any direct role in the course of their proceedings and instead adopts a contemplative viewpoint from which any partisan stance is considered at best premature or at worst a product of a thoughtless zealotry. It is clear Leontius has made no such deliberate manoeuvre, but in the same manner as Kant he has sidestepped the issue of complicity in lieu of the much less demanding role of a conformist – at least it appears to be. So often Kant is praised for his humane moral system, one that both accords the authority of an absolute whilst also remaining flexible enough to accommodate momentary lapses and mistakes without recourse for punishment; yet by this token, he also relieves us of our own mode of subjectivation and in doing so leaves us open to the abuses of the hegemonic order.

Kant says, 'I must recognise myself as universal subject. I must constitute myself in each of my actions as a universal subject by conforming to universal rules.' (Foucault, 1991b: 372) Except these rules are no longer that of practical reason, but merely those of the hegemonic forces. In this way Kant demands the subject to question themselves: How can I constitute myself as a subject of ethics? Recognise myself as such? and by this introduces the means by which individuals are subjugated by the dominant order. (Foucault, 1991b: 372) For Foucault, Kant represents another manner in which the subject constitutes itself via a relationship with its self taking place, except as such, each person becomes both the spectator of their own self-generation as well as a spectacle for the dominant system to 'observe, judge, and ratify.' (Armstrong, 2008: 29)

Here is the instigation of the subject-as-spectacle; a review of the events outside the gates of Piraeus reveals how the subject no longer intervenes in any spectacle, let alone if it is a violent one. For Žižek it is Foucault who has misconceived the 'ought-to-do', believing it to be an ethical imperative, whereas, in fact, its role is always subsumed under the political 'is' and 'must' of power relations. Thereby the 'subject-ought-to-do' becomes the subject-spectacle forced to act according to the dominant will; in this relationship violence has no ethical role. To judge the common dominance of the hegemonic state over its subjects, we need only turn to its viewing habits.

Today more than ever, violence is a spectacle for us to behold; no longer do we consider ourselves in immediate relation to its effects, but rather bystanders to its taking place; no longer do we regard violence as a local event, but restricted to conflicts in distant lands; no longer do we view ourselves as involved in its occurrence, but consider our role as critical spectators to its cause and effect. (Sontag, 2003: 16) In our time violence is acknowledged by its visibility, as each massacre, each riot and revolt is marked by live news coverage and broadsheet headlines. Our access to thousands of violent events across the world, 'brutal acts of torture, the picking out of eyes, the crushing of testicles' (Žižek, 2008: 9), is only of value as a spectacle for our discernment. They are judged according to their humanitarian expense, their cultural, political and economic cost; they are not ethical dilemmas for us to embroil ourselves in deliberating over, but issues of 'ought' and 'is' determined by social and political factors. (Ransom, 1997:1) It is no longer the role of the individual to confer value upon an event, but rather a symbolic spectator who discerns worth by its relation to the hegemonic order of society.

This is not to say, that becoming a spectacle is inherently a mediated activity, since it goes beyond any individual discursive technique, institutional practice or experiential realm; instead, these merely are most prevalent manifestations today. They may seem dated, but those original discussion by Foucault around disciplinary power and panoptical regimes, represents a founding gesture in theorising an ethics in relation to spectacle. Whereas writers such as Paul Virilio and Guy Debord lack any sustained engagement with these ethical issues precisely because of their emphasis on the overwhelming dominance of the spectacle in mediating subject identities.

In this way, instead they merely highlight how all subjects become divorced from any ethical relationship with violent events, as each person, rather than depending on their own moral compass, accedes responsibility to the better judgement of their social and political circumstances. Hence the subject becomes reliant upon the common consensus, approved as such only by conforming to pre-agreed value judgements ratified via juridical rule and behavioural norms. It is apparent that this is not a conscious decision either, since such a choice would result in the dismissal of all ethical worth; and even today this is inconceivable en-masse. (Žižek, 2008: 45-46) Instead it occurs by a torsion in its presentation: it appears that the hegemonic order is founded under the duress of an ethical absolute and then appeals for an equivalent moral consensus, whereas in fact, it is the reverse that holds true, since the system itself conjures the impression of a moral consensus and passes it as the result of an ethical absolutism; except, even this consensus is itself an illusion fashioned by the hegemonic structure so as to initiate the situation. It is akin to suggesting that, 'you should do this because everyone else does' and 'it must be right because not everyone can be wrong'.

Thus by a sleight-of-hand the individual is convinced to yield responsibility to the symbolic spectator. In this manner, it is not necessarily a choice made by individuals themselves, but rather a pact made between each individual and the hegemonic order. As such each subject becomes the spectacle of their surroundings and is dislodged from a position as subject-spectator and reallocated the title of spectacle-subject; by renouncing ethical judgement to the spectator-other, they defer their moral obligation as a person, becoming themselves a spectacle for discernment. Is this not how it feels to be subject; under the watchful eye of a strict supervisor? Or even how a conscience feels; with an inner voice passing judgement over us? But it is not our own moral system that is in control here, but rather those who hold dominion over us in the structural order. Thus we are both divorced from any ethical involvement with our environment as well as from ourselves as moral individuals.

This is an idea George Orwell gave emphatic expression to in his short article 'Shooting an Elephant'. Although published in 1936 it refers to a time when Orwell was commissioned in the Indian Imperial Police in the 1920s. It depicts a police officer, himself posted in Burma, who resorts to the execution of an elephant after it trampled a local man and rampaged through the streets of Moulmein during a period of intense hormonal aggression, otherwise known as 'musth'. Orwell describes the situation for the unnamed narrator as a time where he was 'hated by large numbers of people' (2000: 18), yet of particular import though, is his description of the moment before the elephant is killed:

I glanced round at the crowd that had followed me. It was an immense crowd, two thousand at the least and growing every minute. It blocked the road for a long distance on either side. ... suddenly I realized that I should have to shoot the elephant after all. (Orwell, 2000: 22)

It is apparent from the start that the officer is a spectacle for the people of Moulmein; he is under observation and because of it he feels their combined

will as an edict or command: 'the people expected it of me and I had got to do it; I could feel their two thousand wills pressing me forward, irresistibly.' (Orwell, 2000: 22) Orwell portrays the decision to kill the elephant as being 'out of his hands':

I had committed myself to doing it when I sent for the rifle. [...] To come all that way, rifle in hand, with two thousand people marching at my heels, and then to trail feebly away, having done nothing – no, that was impossible. (2000: 22)

It is not that it is difficult for him to comprehend of another action; rather it is 'impossible', and hence he is not judged by his actions towards the elephant, but instead according to whether his actions conform to the will of the crowd.

Thus our conduct is no longer subject to an ethical system, internal or external, but rather only in relation to the will of the hegemonic structure; for Orwell 'a sahib has got to act like a sahib; he has got to appear resolute, to know his own mind and do definite things.' (2000: 22) In conforming to the will of the dominant system we fulfil the only duty required of us and our reward for doing so is the absolution of our actions. For the officer in Moulmein this is offered by the judiciary system:

Afterwards, of course, there was endless discussions about the shooting of the elephant. [...] legally I had done the right thing, for a mad elephant has to be killed, like a mad dog, if its owner fails to control it. [...] afterwards I was very glad [for the death of the local man]; it put me legally in the right and it gave me a sufficient pretext for shooting the elephant. (Orwell, 2000: 24-25)

In this way, any and all moral and ethical duties are dismissed as contingent factors and subsumed under the remit of the hegemonic discourse; we need not suppose its external will has dominion in toto, it need only maintain its authority over absolute value – such is the Kantian project. By this method, the subject is allowed unrestricted access to all non-legislated events, actions, and behaviours; or, to give an example, all over 18s are entitled to view pornographic material no matter what their own personal qualms about such activities and 'absolved of any moral repercussions' they might incur. (Flyvbjerg, 1998: 232)

We need not consider this as the only means by which the dominant order constitutes a moral vacuum either; by recapitulating our original progression another possibility is also reached.

As an individual comes to be identified as a spectacle rather than a spectator then its ethical nexus is subsumed under the authority of the subject that observes it; for example, a child defers its moral schema to the authority of its parents. As a result of becoming a subject-spectacle any vestiges of personal ethics are dismissed. This would be an acceptable situation in an honest relationship, that is, if the next spectator also maintained a unified and distinct moral system, except the master spectator that beholds all individuals is

neither of these and is almost indefinitely tied to religious, cultural, and juridical variations.

In which case – and, here is our point of departure – if we are to suppose an individual has any capacity for critical thought, then any spectator that declares an appeal to an ethical absolute should also reveal itself as a deceptive construct. Following this realisation an individual may opt for an alternative system in opposition to the master discourse; as such, they will approach a schema not with the basis of a moral teleology but one developed as the inverse to the hegemonic structure. Hence any moral vacuum instigated by the spectator is perpetuated by a counter-culture response as well.

Thus in its modern manifestation, the spectacle-subject is tied to a wider issue concerning the disintegration of moral values. This term is not invoked as the tired conceit of conservative politics, but rather as Friedrich Nietzsche intended: that ‘morality will gradually perish’. It is ‘the great spectacle in a hundred acts reserved for the next two centuries in Europe – the most terrible, most questionable, and perhaps also the most hopeful of all spectacles.’ (Nietzsche, 1969: 27) According to Foucault, this prophecy has already come to pass: he declares that ‘the idea of a morality as obedience to a code of rules is now disappearing, has already disappeared.’ (Foucault, 1990a: 49) In following our analysis, we must agree. Our task in response to this must be the re-formulation of ethics according to a politics of action and not divorced from it; such a self-identifying moral code would be akin to the search for ethical absolutes that initiated our impasse to begin with following Kant.

At this juncture it is expedient to detail our ethical structure as a political will. To found a new ethics is to wish to re-imagine and re-invent the multiple facets of our political subjectivation; ‘it is to wish to recreate ourselves’. In accord with Foucault, ethics consists of the set of attitudes, practices, and goals by which we guide our moral self-fashioning. Any other definition would refute the possibility of our current project and commit us to a series of failed resistances in perpetuity. These modes of self-continuation can be divided according to Foucault, into four principal aspects: the ethical substance, the mode of subjection, the practices of the self, and the mode of being, or ‘way of life’, towards which ethics aims. (O’Leary, 2002: 12) It is clear that dominant systems engage with this structure at the point of subjection, rearticulating the individual along a separate schema in line with itself rather than in connection with the ethical substance of a subject and perpetuating itself on the pretence of a moral tautology.

This first aspect, the ethical substance, is the part of a subject that it takes as the material of its own moral conduct; i.e., its own acts, desires, feelings. According to Foucault, in both the Classical era and in ancient Greece the ethical substance was considered as the base strata from which the resulting system was established. (Foucault, 1992: 38) It was invoked to cover desires and acts as well as pleasures. Second, there is the mode of subjection; that is, the manner in which a subject follows a coded order in response to their substance within; it could be ‘a divine command’, or a duty to perform a

certain responsibility. (O'Leary, 2002: 12) In the Classical era, according to Foucault, the mode of subjection was a 'personal choice' (Foucault, 1992b: 356) and gave the subject its value according to the moral system. Third, there are the 'forms of elaboration' of self; that is, the techniques used to constitute the self as an ethical subject, ranging from the interpolation of human rights or legal doctrine, to the 'self-examination of thoughts and actions.' (O'Leary, 2002: 12) Finally, there is the 'teleology of the moral subject'; that is, the formulating of an ideal to be reached as an ethical subject. It is best illustrated by the example of religion, since an afterlife is a palpable expression of a moral teleology.

Our task now must be to conceive of a subject system that has at its base the re-actualisation of ethical substance as a political force, so as to offer a 'resistance to the dominant schema' of subject-spectacle relations. (Heller, 1996: 90) As such Foucault allows for a 'descriptive critique' (Ransom, 2002: 3) of our current situation without forgoing an absolutism that would invoke the spectacle-subject again under a different guise. By this Foucault offers a model of resistance that makes available a rich and suggestive answer for political action (Pickett, 1996: 447), yet, in doing so, foregrounds the individual freedom of morality via the suppression of inter-subject social dilemmas. In his invocation of power as an omnipotent spectator, one writ large upon the psyche of the common individual, Foucault dismisses all practical ethics as wandering in the realm of the dictator. Žižek allows us to see how the ought-to-do offered us by Foucault is also unwittingly an ought-to-do only when watched; the reason it is so hidden a title is because there is always the figure watching over, or rather, our conscience.

In articulating this conclusion though, we approach the presence of the passive spectator in a more knowledgeable light: either the subject is socially responsible to their image as a subject-spectacle, therefore we must consider their inactivity as the acceptable norm, or else, intervention is a social requirement and the subject does not consider themselves as actually being watched by a powerful enough observer to enforce this edict. These are to be understood as the two most common interpretations of the situation. Yet if we follow in an explanation guided by our analysis of Foucault, then the subject reveals itself only as subject-spectacle and never as the spectator-subject. This is how Leontius presents a radical variation on the typical 'crises of subjectivation' (Foucault, 1990b: 95), since he represents an individual who damns his own position as a subject who observes; by cursing his eyes Leontius admits not only to his role as a subject-spectacle to his own conscience, but also as the spectator-subject complicit in the event he observes. Thus Leontius holds already the required moral teleology.

In which case, we must be careful though in divorcing all moral command to the power above, whatever that entity may be, since our own perspective is absolved of any ethical complicity. Thus, if a prison guard is assigned the execution of an inmate the state legislates for his absolution upon the completion of his task. Orwell offers us such an event in 'A Hanging'. Again set in Burma, our unnamed narrator is an officer attached to the garrison of a local prison:

It is curious, but till that moment I had never realized what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man. When I saw the prisoner step aside to avoid the puddle, I saw the mystery, the unspeakable wrongness, of cutting a life short when it is in full tide. This man was not dying, he was alive just as we were alive. [...] He and we were a party of men walking together, seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding the same world; and in two minutes, with a sudden snap, one of us would be gone – one mind less, one world less. (Orwell, 2000: 16)

In actions our identities are formed; in them, we enact and thus define ourselves as social beings, often in contrast to the ideal we imagine ourselves to be, yet by his inaction the guard is transparent against the social order. To want to act is not the same as actually committing the deed, but our ideal is still as caustic upon our psyche, especially when we fall so short of it:

We looked at the lashed, hooded man on the drop, and listened to his cries – each cry another second of life; the same thought was in all our minds; oh, kill him quickly, get it over, stop that abominable noise!

Suddenly the superintendent made up his mind. Throwing up his head he made a swift motion with his stick. 'Chalo!' he shouted almost fiercely. (Orwell, 2000: 17)

As Orwell himself remarks, we all rail against inequalities and injustice, yet very few seriously want to abolish them. 'Here you come upon the important fact that every revolutionary opinion draws part of its strength from a secret conviction that nothing can be changed.' (Orwell, 2001: 38) He distinguishes apathy to be the standard sentiment amongst man, whereas in fact, we are convinced by the hegemonic order that we have an innate immoral state. It is this same structure that also offers the means to our absolution via the disavowal of ethical value in general.

Orwell presents the release of this moral debt as almost euphoric, bringing fellow man together under its umbrella of absolution; even though the real source of this happiness can never be known to the subject:

Several people laughed – at what, nobody was certain.

[...]

We all began laughing again. At that moment Francis's anecdote seemed extraordinarily funny. We all had a drink together, native and European alike, quite amicably. The dead man was a hundred yards away. (Orwell, 2000: 18)

It is a simple example, yet its necessary power is clear: by referring all ethical consideration to a symbolic spectator then the subject is divorced of its personal system. In doing so the subject gains an ethical shield behind which it can engage in all manner of behaviours, actions, and beliefs as long as they are sanctioned by the governing system. It even allows for a freedom beyond the moral law: the subject can now refuse to submit to the governing system

under the pretence of claiming its own ethical construct, except this new system will only be conceived in opposition to the overarching powers rather than as the arrival of an independent, self-generated ethics and as such is equally devoid of meaning.

It is the moral relativism of current social and political thought that is expressed as the opposite to the above sentiment, instead regarding both positions as meaningful ethical constructs. (Rajchman, 1986: 179) In this manner, the prioritisation of the dictator-spectator figure is perpetuated along with the continued inactivity towards events of ethical significance. Without developing a political and social will in line with personal subjectivation, as Foucault considers it, then the subject will continue to be considered merely as the spectacle itself rather than the means by which the spectacle event may be interacted with. (Rajchman, 1986: 165) As Žižek consistently declares: 'sometimes, doing nothing is the most violent thing to do.' (Žižek, 2008: 183)

In the same manner, Foucault declares the means by which to assess the function of ethics as both a form of domination and the form by which it may become more liberated. It must be made sure though that this does not develop into the re-nominalisation of a moral system by which societal intervention is denied access to the welfare of the individual, such a utilitarian framework would involve the evolution of a political law homologous to that which is currently in place.

Our future pathway is a manoeuvre between these extremes, not itself a compromise but an interplay of both spectator and spectacle without either force exerting too great a social or political impact. In this we avoid the danger Nietzsche declares as the 'moral chatter of some about others.' (Nietzsche, 1974: § 335) Instead criticism can itself gain the role of a mode of subjection, as Foucault considers criticism as a kind of 'virtue', that is, an endeavour worthwhile in its own right. (Ransom, 2002: 3) It may appear Foucault dashes the hope, if we had one, that there is some 'good we can affirm' (Taylor, 1984: 152) as a result of the understanding these analyses give us; yet, in re-articulating the social and political limitations of 'ought' and 'is' via their realisation as subject and spectacle, then perhaps we have 'free[d] thought from what it silently thinks', allowing us to 'think otherwise.' (Foucault, 1992: 14-15)

If there is a lesson here, it should be to resist the lure of absolutism; we should reject ethics, in the name of politics. When violence has become a spectacle, when the subject has become a spectacle, empathy should become a dirty word; instead it is complicity that should be felt. Only in this way can we call forth a politics of action.

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