Conducting Critique: Reconsidering Foucault's Engagement with the Question of the Subject

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Abstract: A common criticism of Michel Foucault's works is that his writings on power relations over-emphasized the effects that technologies of power have upon the subjection of humans, rendering any attempt of resistance futile and reducing the subject to a mere passive effect of power. This criticism treats Foucault's consideration of ethics in his later works as a break from his earlier views. In this paper, by reading Foucault's books alongside his lectures and interviews, two ways will be proposed through which the question of the subject can be productively raised and located throughout Foucault's works, even within his concerns with power relations. The first way is through the relation between *assujettisement* and critique, and the second way is through the notions of government and conduct.

Keywords: power relations, subject, *assujettisement*, critique, governmentality, counter-conduct.

S ince his death in 1984, Michel Foucault's works have been productively used in multiple fields of study, ranging from geography to politics to psychology and education studies. Rather than emphasize the particular applicability of his ideas, I would like to propose a reading of Foucault's works that highlights the question of the subject and its formation in relation to power relations. A common criticism is that his writings on power over-emphasized the effects that technologies of power have on the subjection of humans, rendering attempts of resistance futile and reducing the subject to a mere passive

effect of power. According to this criticism, by exaggerating the pervasiveness and intricacy of disciplinary mechanisms and power relations, Foucault overlooked – and even considered as an extension of the workings of power – individual agency. It has also been argued that he had to break away from his earlier ideas on power in order to be able to articulate his views on subjectivity and include possibilities of resistance to power. Several commentators point towards a break within Foucault's works around the late 1970s and the early 1980s, arguing that he was forced to reconsider and weaken his earlier views on power so as to 'make room' for the subject.[1] This reading of Foucault's works distorts his works in such a way that makes them less ethically and politically fruitful. It overlooks, moreover, the extent to which analytic tools that could refer to the question of the subject, freedom and resistance were already available in his works before his explicit engagement with ethics.

Foucault proposed several characterizations of his own work. In an interview in 1983, he claimed that his works revolve around three axes: the axis of truth, the axis of power, and the axis of ethics.[2] Although this often fuels the easy categorization of his works into three phases – the 1960s corresponding to the archaeological phase, the 1970s to the genealogical phase, and the 1980s to the ethical phase – a more fruitful engagement with his work requires one to emphasize the interrelations between the different axes of his work. Instead of a smooth progression from one phase to the other, or from one set of questions to the other, Foucault preferred the analogy of the spiral, where one proceeds through analyses and returns to the same questions, this time tackled through new conceptual apparata. In this way, although the analysis of power and knowledge occupied Foucault through the 1960s and 1970s, and the analysis of ethics in the 1980s, the two concerns cannot be

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1   See, for example, Nancy Fraser, 'Foucault on Modern Power: Empirical Insights and Normative Confusions', *Praxis International*, 3 (1981), 272–87; Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, 1987), 238–93; Charles Taylor, 'Foucault on Freedom and Truth', in *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Couzens Hoy (Oxford, 1986), 69–102; Michael Walzer, 'The Politics of Michel Foucault', in *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Couzens Hoy (Oxford, 1986), 51–68; Peter Dews, 'The Return of the Subject in Late Foucault', *Radical Philosophy*, 51 (1989), 37–41.

2   See Michel Foucault, 'On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress', in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, Vol. 1, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley *et al*. (New York, 1997), 262–3.

radically distinguished. It is this distinction and separation that fuels the several criticisms of his work, especially those related to the question of the subject. Moreover, by focusing solely on Foucault's published books, the claim that a break marks his works in the 1970s and 1980s is more understandable, but it is less so if his books are read alongside the annual lecture courses he delivered at the *Collège De France*, which offer further contextual depth to his books and are especially important in light of understanding his move from power/knowledge to ethics without seeing this as a drastic shift.

Although Foucault's name is immediately associated with the notion of power, he discouraged a reading of his work that foregrounded this notion. As he claimed in yet another self-characterization in 'The Subject and Power', it is the notion of the subject and its formation that is the goal of his work.[3] Although such self-characterizations should not be accepted uncritically, placing the question of the subject at the heart of Foucault's works is a plausible position which can be argued for. The question of the subject is a multi-faceted one associated with questions of resistance, freedom, agency, and critique, and is particularly extrapolated in works within critical theory and feminist thought. In some form or another, all the critics mentioned refer to this question within Foucault's works, particularly his ideas on the relation between power and subjectivity, or on the grounds upon which certain exercises of power and domination can be criticized and resisted if the values of truth and freedom are undermined. This paper will propose two ways through which the question of the subject can be productively raised and located throughout his works, even within his concerns with power relations. The first way is through the relation between *assujettisement* and critique, and the second way is through the notions of government and conduct.

Assujettisement and Critique

In 'The Subject and Power', Foucault admitted that although his concern was with processes through which human subjects are created

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3   See Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1983), 208.

– processes of subjectification – the question of power seemed to be prioritized in his writings. The reason he identified for this was that a more adequate account of processes that objectify the subject necessitated a better account of power relations. In this essay, he directly considered the question of how power and struggles against it relate to the question of subject-formation. Foucault claimed that power struggles 'question the status of the individual: […] they attack everything which separates the individual, breaks his links with others, splits up community life, forces the individual back on himself and ties him to his own identity in a constraining way'.[4] Hence, the main question is that of identity – of 'who we are' – and the refusal to be defined by such procedures and techniques of power/knowledge. This echoes his claims in *Discipline and Punish* that his interest was in how an individual is made subject, identified, categorized, interpreted and understood. One, therefore, cannot maintain that power/knowledge is besides the concern with the question of the subject. The productivity of the power/knowledge matrix applies not only to fields of knowledge or domains of objects but, especially, to the creation of individual subjects.

When Foucault spoke of the term 'subject', he often referred to its dual meaning and emphasized that '[t]here are two meanings of the word *subject*: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to'.[5] It is useful to look closer at what can be regarded as a mere matter of translation but which, nonetheless, has an important theoretical import. The French word Foucault used which is generally translated as subjection or subjugation is *assujettissement*. Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg maintain that besides the negative and passive connotations of translating *assujettissement* as subjection or subjugation (and sometimes as subjectification), there is also a realm of autonomy and possibility of resistance implied by Foucault.[6] They argue that this active connotation of *assujettissement* becomes especially important when Foucault went beyond his account of disciplinary power in order to conceive of power in terms of governmentality, which will be discussed below.

4   Ibid., 211–2.
5   Ibid., 212.
6   See Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg, 'The Aesthetic and Ascetic Dimensions of an Ethics of Self-Fashioning: Nietzsche and Foucault', *Parrhesia*, Vol. 2 (2007), 55.

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Furthermore, this notion of *assujettisement* has been thoroughly examined in feminist critical theory and gender studies, enabling a fruitful engagement with Foucault's ideas, both in the applications of and contentions to these ideas. Amy Allen, for example, dwells further on this question of the subject within feminist theory and argues that 'the most important insight of Foucault's analysis of power is its emphasis on the interplay between constraint and enablement that is central to his account of subjection'.[7] Allen writes that 'subjection involves being subjected to power relations but this process produces subjects who are capable of action and even of autonomy,'[8] where autonomy, she adds, is understood as the capacities for critical reflection and deliberate self-transformation. Although, according to Foucault, this possible activity too would be imbued with power relations, this need not amount to subscribing to the overly-pessimistic conclusion that the subject is completely socially constructed and determined by power relations. Social construction need not be understood as absolute determination. Acknowledging this interplay avoids interpreting Foucault's ideas as implying a helpless and passive subject, showing that this criticism directed towards his ideas rests upon an incomplete reading of his works. Although it is true that after the publication of *The Will to Knowledge* in 1976 there were important changes in his work, these are not radical changes that annul his previous works but are fruitful expansions which complement his ideas on power with a consideration of ethics and subjectivity.[9]

Alongside a closer look at the notion of *assujettisement*, it is important to consider Foucault's views on critique to observe how his engagement with the question of the subject goes beyond the characterization of the subject as a passive effect of power. In 'What is Critique?', he maintained that critique is characterized by dispersion, and defined critique as 'an instrument, a means for a future or a truth that it will not know nor happen to be, it oversees a domain it would want to police and is unable to regulate'.[10] Crucially, Foucault identified the realm

7   Amy Allen, 'Feminism and the Subject of Politics,' in *New Waves in Political Theory*, ed. Boudewijn de Bruin and Christopher Zurn (London, 2009), 4.

8   Ibid., 5.

9   See Amy Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves: Power, Autonomy, and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory* (New York, 2008), 23.

10   Michel Foucault, 'What is Critique?', in *The Politics of Truth*, eds. Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth (New York, 1997), 25.

of critique as that which brings together the multiple relationships between power, truth and the subject. It is in this sense that genealogical critique entails the question of the subject, besides power/knowledge. In associating critique with 'the art of not being governed quite so much,'[11] the possibility of resistance and freedom by the subject is implied. Hence in this 1978 lecture, prior to his exploration of an ethics of the self and freedom, Foucault was able to speak of the subject's field of possible action: 'I will say that critique is the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth'.[12]

Judith Butler takes her cue from Foucault's 1978 lecture and considers the question of the relation between critique and the subject. Butler maintains that '[p]aradoxically, self-making and desubjugation happen simultaneously when a mode of existence is risked which is unsupported by what he calls the regime of truth'.[13] Responding to commentators who claim that Foucault's works are void of any critical and normative content, Butler argues that this finitude in terms of lack of support provides the Foucaultian notion of critique with normative commitments which, however, cannot be fit into and understood within the current vocabulary of normativity. This does not mean that normativity, for Foucault, is just a matter of decision or preference, but rather is a lived critique, a practised critique of questioning that which is taken as fixed. This is not done in the spirit of unnecessary amoral transgression but, as Butler says, 'because one has already run up against a crisis within the epistemological field in which one lives'.[14] This is why the risk of critique as destabilizing regularized parameters is likened, by Foucault and Butler, to the risking of one's stability and the hardship associated with the cultivation of a virtuous character. This virtue is not based upon a set of objective or clearly articulated laws, so the kind of critique Foucault is able to undertake will not follow a prescriptive or juridical model. Butler argues that such models do not suffice for Foucault and this makes the lack of clear normativity in his notion of critique problematic. The difficulty arises because through

11   Ibid., 29.
12   Ibid., 32.
13   Judith Butler, 'What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue', in *The Judith Butler Reader*, eds. Sara Salih and Judith Butler (Oxford, 2004), 306.
14   Ibid., 307–8.

adopting a prescriptive model, certainty and stability is sought, yet the notions of certainty and stability themselves disable the critical task of interrogating rules and judgements operated by oneself and operating within society. In 'What is Critique?', Foucault remarked that in critique, liberty is at stake. Butler picks upon this point and argues that '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'.[15] Apart from the transgressive or aesthetic features generally associated with this image of critique, one needs to recognize the risks inherent in such a practice and the difficulty of such work. This risky virtue which, for Butler, must be fulfilled through thought and language involves pushing the present ordering of things to the limits, highlighting how the stakes of genealogical critique intertwine with the question of subject-formation, pointing less towards a break within Foucault's works and more towards fruitful expansions in his notions of power and subjectivity.

Governmentality, Counter-conduct, Freedom

Another way of analysing the relation between Foucault's ideas on power/knowledge and the subject is by considering the expansion of his ideas on power into biopower and governmentality. In the final chapter of *The Will to Knowledge*, Foucault introduced the concept of biopower or power over life. He argued that the idea of a sovereign power, defined through a right of seizure of life, was transformed into a power over life where life itself becomes the concern of politics. As he put it, 'the ancient right to *take* life or *let* live was replaced by a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death'.[16] From the seventeenth century onwards, Foucault maintained, biopower developed around two poles: 'an *anatomo-politics of the human body* [… and] *a biopolitics of the population*'.[17] The first pole incorporates disciplinary power and so does not mark any significant addition to his account of power in *Discipline and Punish*. What is innovative in his

15 Ibid., 315.
16 Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (London, 1998 [1976]), 138 (emphasis in original).
17 Ibid., 139 (emphasis in original).

thinking is his discussion of the second pole around which biopower developed, characterized by the use of regulatory controls as tools for employing this kind of power upon a population. This can be further appreciated by considering Foucault's 1977-78 lecture course at the *Collège De France*, *Security, Territory, Population*, where he analysed security as a further modality of power, arguing that power does not simply function through the exercise of sovereignty over individuals, neither solely through disciplinary mechanisms employed through surveillance of individuals, but that the modality of power particular to the mechanisms of security is the government of populations.

Foucault considered government as an economy of power and turned to literature concerning government in order to grasp the historical roots of its meaning. He noted that in Greco-Roman antiquity and the Middle Ages, there were ample treatises written to advise the ruler on how to conduct oneself and how to exercise power whilst maintaining the respect of the ruled. However, he observed that between the sixteenth and the eighteenth century, a general problematic of government appears and such treatises were presented not just as advice but as arts of government. The term 'government' has a broad sense in this context; it includes multiple issues such as the 'government of oneself, [...] the government of souls and of conduct, [...] the government of children, [...] the government of the state by the prince'.[18] Foucault showed that with this broad definition, it is not just territory that is the object of government but also human relationships, wealth, resources, and epidemics. Moreover, the governor is not presented as a powerful entity ready to assert its might if necessary, but as the possessor of wisdom and knowledge of how to manage things accordingly. This idea of possessing the appropriate knowledge in order to govern is an important one especially in relation to the later development of forms of knowledge pertaining to the state – statistics – quantifying the dimensions and strength of the state or rationalizing the exercise of the state's power or its increase.[19]

Foucault maintained that the three movements of government, population, and political economy have been solidified as a series in the eighteenth century and still remains present today. Hence, this concern

18   Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège De France 1977–1978*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Graham Burchell (New York, 2009), 88.

19   See ibid., 100–1.

with government is explained by his claim that what he wished to undertake is a history of governmentality through which the present can be engaged with and understood. As can be appreciated from his own attempt at defining it, governmentality includes widespread processes and deployments.[20] It entails the complex (or apparatus) formed by institutions and procedures that enables the exercise of a kind of power which has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument. Moreover, governmentality refers to the historical developments that constantly led towards governing as a mode of power to take precedence over other types of power such as sovereignty and discipline. This process resulted in the governmentalization of the modern state from the state of justice in the Middle Ages and the administrative state in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Through genealogical critique, Foucault traced the historical roots of the rationality underlining governmentality by considering pastoral power and seventeenth century theories of the reason of the state (*raison d'état)* as a prelude to modern governmentality.

It is relevant to outline the general features of pastoral power Foucault highlighted in order to link these with the discussion of the relation between power/knowledge and the subject.[21] Pastoral power – the power of the shepherd – is exercised over a moving flock and not over a territory. It is a type of power defined in terms of beneficence rather than omnipotence. Hence, it is the well-being of the flock and its salvation that is the objective of this type of power. Pastoral power is, thus, not conceived as the ability of the powerful to exhibit strength and dominion over the powerless, but as the shepherd's dutiful application of care towards the flock in an attempt to safeguard its every member. Pastoral power is an individualizing power since the shepherd singles out and gives attention to every sheep. Furthermore, through the pastoral type of power, Foucault identified a particular relationship which was developed between the subject and truth. He maintained that the obligation of the Christian pastor to teach rested upon a particular conception of teaching which integrated the direction of daily conduct and spiritual direction. As a result, the pastor's teaching is not one-

20   See ibid., 108–9.
21   See ibid., 124–8.

dimensional or of a general kind but is specific to the individual. This takes the form of an exhaustive observation of the life of the individual and a meticulous supervision of behaviour. Foucault contrasted the form of spiritual direction in Greco-Roman antiquity with this form of spiritual direction specific to the Christian pastorate. He noted that in antiquity, an individual sought a spiritual director in exceptional circumstances such as when one was going through a bad time. Hence, 'spiritual direction was voluntary, episodic, consolatory, and at certain times it took place through the examination of conscience'.[22] Therefore, this form of spiritual direction had an objective – the self-mastery of the individual who sought the spiritual direction – and was not done for its own sake. Within the Christian pastorate, spiritual direction took a different form because it was no longer perceived as a voluntary, circumstantial and goal-oriented activity but served the purpose of developing a particular discourse of the truth about the self through the examination of conscience. This truth is, in turn, extracted from the individual, binding the individual to the spiritual director, further marking the relationship of subordination to the other.

This analysis of pastoral power in relation to governmentality enabled Foucault to dwell upon the notion of conduct. He explicitly exploited the semantic flexibility of the term 'conduct' and defined it in this way:

[T]he word 'conduct' refers to two things. Conduct is the activity of conducting (*conduire*), of conduction (*la conduction*) if you like, but it is equally the way in which one conducts oneself (*se conduit*), lets oneself be conducted (*se laisse conduire*), is conducted (*est conduit*), and finally, in which one behaves (*se comporter*) as an effect of a form of conduct (*une conduite*) as the action of conducting or of conduction (*conduction*).[23]

This notion plays an important role in the consideration of Foucault's engagement with the question of subject-formation in relation to power, and to what extent can agency and resistance be theorized within his works. He identified forms of resistance that emerged from within the pastorate itself as specific revolts of conduct whose aims were to be

22   Ibid., 182.
23   Ibid., 193.

conducted differently, by other leaders, objectives, and procedures, or not to be conducted by others so as to be able to conduct themselves. These included asceticism, which Foucault argued is incompatible with complete subordination of the individual since asceticism aims towards self-mastery and indifference to temptation; the formation of new religious communities stemming from doctrinal and hierarchical disagreements; mysticism, due to its avoidance of the hierarchy of the church and its mistrust of confession; and possible readings of scripture and certain eschatological beliefs which relegate the pastorate and its interventions to the background.[24] Before settling for *counter-conduct*, Foucault considered a number of terms to suitably describe the sense of such practices. In explaining Foucault's choice of words, Arnold I. Davidson truly captures the importance that the notion of counter-conduct has in understanding Foucault's move from politics to ethics, or from power relations to technologies of the self, by carefully articulating the various interrelations between them:

Foucault's problem of vocabulary, his attempt to find a specific word to designate the resistances, refusals, revolts against being conducted in a certain way, show how careful he was in wanting to find a concept that neglected neither the ethical nor the political dimensions and that made it possible to recognize their nexus. After rejecting the notions of 'revolt,' 'disobedience,' 'insubordination,' 'dissidence,' and 'misconduct,' for reasons ranging from their being notions that are either too strong, too weak, too localized, too passive, or too substance-like, Foucault proposes the expression 'counter-conduct'.[25]

An appreciation of the multiple dimensions of conduct regards both the political setting of the notion of conduct as well as the ethical component within movements of resistance. The link between ethics and government through the notion of conduct can also be seen in *The Subject and Power*, where Foucault claims that 'to "conduct" is at the same time to "lead" others [...] and a way of behaving within a more or less open field of possibilities'.[26]

24   See ibid., 205–14.
25   Arnold I. Davidson, introduction to Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège De France 1977–1978*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Graham Burchell (New York, 2009), xxi–xxii.
26   Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', 220–1.

In several ways, through an analysis of the notion of conduct, one can see an aspect of Foucault's discussion of governmentality in relation to the question of the subject as a prelude to his later writings on ethics. Firstly, he claimed that the mode of rationality underpinning the modern state is 'a factor for individualization and a totalitarian principle'.[27] The totalizing aspect is what makes the state be perceived as a 'cold monster', where any attempt of resistance is considered to be futile. The individualizing aspect, on the other hand, concerns the ways in which subjects are created through modes of individualization. This conception of power led him to develop an understanding of resistance that draws on the relationship between the self and truth. This refers to the constitution and reconstitution of the subject in political engagement, which is what Foucault's conception of critique rests on. This conception of resistance is far from representing a humanistic understanding of liberation as being totally opposed to power and ever closer to a truth. Foucault's notion of critique, therefore, depends on a personal and political contestation of a truth through which the self is defined.[28] Secondly, a link between government and the question of the subject can be seen by considering the modes of individualization inherent to pastoral power. Of paramount importance is the process of subjectivation, a process whereby the subject is created by ascribing to itself a specific truth. Foucault elaborated this further in his analysis of sexuality and confessional technology in *The Will to Knowledge* and, later, in his discussion of the hermeneutics of the self. What is at stake in the analysis of subjectivation is the relationship of the self to itself, which is, precisely, the starting point of Foucault's discussion of ethics. As he realized, an analysis of this relationship must be understood in relation to technologies of the self and not just technologies of power. Consequently, the move towards a consideration of subjectivity and the grounding of ethics in the freedom of the individual in Foucault's later works cannot be separated from his continuous concern with the inescapability of power relations. Lois McNay makes a similar point when referring to his discussion of freedom and autonomy, and argues that:

27   Michel Foucault, '"Omnes et Singulatim": Toward a Critique of Political Reason', in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, Vol. 3, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Colin Gordon *et al*. (London, 2000), 325.
28   See Ben Golder, 'Foucault and the Genealogy of Pastoral Power', *Radical Philosophy Review*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2007), 175.

some commentators have taken this as a sign of defeat in that the thinker who once proclaimed the death of the subject finishes by restoring the free individual in what appears to be a retreat to a form of neoliberal thought. The use of such concepts signals an important shift in Foucault's work, but this should not be seen as a retraction of previous thought; rather it is a rethinking of the relation between his work and Enlightenment thought in general.[29]

Therefore, in the same way that overlooking the development of Foucault's later ideas on ethics would constitute an incomplete reading of his earlier ideas on power and governmentality, his later ideas on ethics cannot be understood without considering his earlier ideas on power.

In fact, through the notion of government, in one of his last interviews in 1984, Foucault reconsidered and distinguished between different forms of power relations. In order to counter the intuitive claim that power is intrinsically bad and dominating, he maintained that power is not evil. He argued that 'we must distinguish between power relations understood as strategic games between liberties [...] and the states of domination that people ordinarily call "power"'.[30] Foucault claimed that when humans relate to each other, in 'verbal communications [...], or amorous, institutional, or economic relationships, power is always present: I mean a relationship in which one person tries to control the conduct of the other'.[31] He emphasized that such power relations are unstable and can be continuously reversed, and so power relations are only possible on the condition that there are free subjects. This explains his claim that there can be no power – understood in this way – without the possibility of resistance. Contrary to what is sometimes implied, Foucault did not put forward the view that owing to the pervasiveness of power relations, all possibilities of freedom are prevented. Rather, he claimed that the existence of relations of power themselves imply the possibility of freedom. This view should not be interpreted as excluding states of domination. Such states do exist and Foucault described them as states where power relations are fixed as asymmetrical, greatly limiting the margin of freedom. This approach to Foucault's engagement with the

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29   Lois McNay, *Foucault: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, 1994), 129.
30   Michel Foucault, 'The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom', in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley *et al*., Vol. 1 (New York, 1997), 299.
31   Ibid., 292.

question of the subject, both in his later conceptualization of ethics and in his earlier analyses of power relations and governmentality, does not point towards a radical break within his works. As he put it in a late interview:

I am saying that 'governmentality' implies the relationship of the self to itself, and I intend this concept of 'governmentality' to cover the whole range of practices that constitute, define, organize, and instrumentalize the strategies that individuals in their freedom can use in dealing with each other. [...] Thus, the basis for all this is freedom, the relationship of the self to itself and the relationship to the other. [...] I believe that the concept of governmentality makes it possible to bring out the freedom of the subject and its relationship to others – which constitutes the very stuff [*matière*] of ethics.[32]

The focus on the active self-constitution of the subject through practices of the self in Foucault's later works does not imply that these practices are freely invented by the subject outside the realm of power relations. He acknowledged that these are models one discovers in the culture in which one lives and are, thus, imposed upon the subject, distancing his views from Sartre's existentialist notion of authenticity, and placing his views closer to Nietzsche's ideas on self-creation.[33]

Conclusion: The Ethos of Critique

In 'What is Enlightenment?', Foucault referred to Kant's invocation to dare to know (*sapere aude*) as a task that implies risk and courage within an attitude which analyses the present as a particular moment in history. Foucault sought to show that the Enlightenment is less about being faithful to a set of doctrines or the kernels of rationality, and more about the 'the permanent reactivation of an attitude – that is, of a philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era'.[34] He maintained that the task nowadays is to investigate the present limits of what is considered as necessary in the constitution of subjects. Through this limit-attitude one investigates

32 Ibid., 300.
33 See Michel Foucault, 'On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress', 262.
34 Michel Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?' in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, Vol. 1, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley *et al*. (New York, 1997), 312.

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the place occupied by the singular, the contingent and the arbitrary in what is given as universal. It is an attitude that seeks to move beyond analyses grounded in transcendental categories or universal structures of possible knowledge or moral action, and instead analyses present discourses as historical events, thereby highlighting 'the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think'.[35] This critique or historico-critical attitude is experimental – it opens up new fields of inquiry, points to possibilities of change, and gives form to what he called the undefined work of freedom. Foucault embodied this attitude in his studies of the different modes in which a historically recurring body of practices and issues such as insanity, health, crime and sexual relationships are problematized in particular historical periods.

Foucault's engagement with the question of the subject highlights the multiple connected facets of his philosophical work. It shows how his move from power/knowledge to ethics and the self is not a break that implies a passive and constituted subject in his earlier works and an active self-constituting agent in his later works. As I have argued, this discontinuous conception of Foucault's philosophical project can be countered by approaching his engagement with the question of the subject through the notions of *assujettisement*, critique, governmentality and conduct. Such an approach is also central to understanding his ideas on power, ethics and the relation between the two. These interesting and important relations entail different mechanisms and techniques through which identities are negotiated and human subjects are rendered intelligible. This complex process is not a harmonious one but involves a continuous struggle between power, subjectivity and freedom; an uneasy and unpredictable balance which shifts throughout history. Following Foucault, one can see that this task has both a political and an ethical bearing since although subjects cannot rid themselves of the historically given – indeed, it is that against which they themselves and anything else is *made* intelligible – individuals have the capacity to *re-make*, re-mould and analyse these formations in order to highlight their lack of fixity and their uncanny nature so as to enable new forms of subjectivity, new forms of power relations and new forms of truth to exist. It is an exercise of thought but also a practice of living.

35   Ibid., 315–6.