

The Ethical Meaning of Foucault's Aesthetics of Existence

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Abstract. In order to grasp the true ethical meaning of Foucault's aesthetics of existence, I begin by explaining in what sense he was an anti-normativist, arguing that the most important thing about the "final" Foucault is his strong emphasis on the idea of human freedom. I go on with a brief discussion about Foucault's sources of inspiration and a criticism of Rorty's kindred plea for "aesthetic life". I strongly reject the interpretation of Foucault's aesthetics of existence in terms of narcissistic individualism, arguing, on the contrary, that it has a definite communitarian dimension. I also claim that it is rooted in the Socratic and Stoic understanding of "care of the self," at the same time allowing new challenging developments fitted for our "post-duty" historical age, by way of analogy with the process of artistic making. I conclude with some short answers to a few questions regarding the status of this aesthetics of living.

Keywords: Foucault, ethics, anti-normativism, subjectivation, aesthetics of existence, care of the self, work of art

FOUCAULT, ANTI-NORMATIVISM, AND FREEDOM

The call for "an aesthetics of existence" fitted for our times appears in Foucault's texts and interviews from his final years. The ground for this ideal is Foucault's *anti-normativist* stand:

[F]or a whole series of reasons, the idea of a morality as obedience to a code of rules is now disappearing, has already disappeared. And to this absence of morality corresponds, must correspond, the search for an aesthetics of existence. (Foucault, 1988a: 49)

"Anti-normativism" is not an expression used by Foucault and it surely doesn't hold a clear-cut meaning. As words like "norm," "normativity," "normativism" may acquire different meanings while being used in different domains and various contexts, the rejection or opposition implied by "anti-normativism" is subject to multiple understandings. However, it is without doubt that a major domain of reference is the theory of law,

where the word “norm” is used to designate the “mandatory scope” of laws and regulations (Legrand, 2007: 7). Used in the context of the history of ethics, the expression “anti-normativism” may designate an opposition to this increased resemblance of modern moral philosophy to a juridical system designed to regulate our private and public existences. We are talking about a general outlook that involves not only the alleged universality of some moral rules, but also a moral decision-making procedure that is quasi-judicial in its nature. At some point, Foucault advances the thesis of “a very strong *juridification* – more precisely, a very strong *codification* – of the moral experience,” starting with “the organization of the penitential system at the beginning of the thirteenth century” and involving the functioning, in Christianity, of “code-oriented” moralities, alongside forms of morality focused on ethical “subjectivation” and “practices of the self,” the latter being more resembling to “moral conceptions in Greek and Greco-Roman antiquity” (Foucault, 1990: 30). So we may see the dominant Kantian but also Utilitarian trend in modern moral philosophy as a kind of secular follow-up to these “code-oriented” moralities developed during Middle Age in Western Europe.

A second point would be to link this understanding of normativism to what many consider to be the fundamental principle of modern moral philosophy: “the priority of the right over the good” (Larmore, 1996: 21-22). Moral judgment must not be grounded on any conception of human fulfillment, happiness, or “good life,” but rather on a rational understanding and recognition of the universal validity of a moral law, no matter what the particular interests of the subjects involved might be. It is quite obvious why this way of thinking involves a rather “impersonal” point of view in judging moral actions, as well as an increased focus on regulating human interactions at the expense of the idea of self-formation, which was the traditional goal of virtue ethics.

At this stage, we may add another dimension to Foucault's anti-normativism: drawing on Legrand (2007: 153-155), we may hold that the most important thing, from a methodological point of view, is Foucault's rejection of the *ideality* of norms or of the ideal character of some fundamental norm (as Kelsen and other thinkers working in the Kantian tradition were arguing). Norms are not to be conceived as some unconditioned demands resembling the status of Divine commandments, but rather as material statements (*énoncés*) acquiring a normative significance within precise frameworks of action and through distinct social practices. It is not only that the “norms” are historically emerging in the social

process, it is that they are always involving a “mode of subjection” (*mode d’assujettissement*) of human beings. In order for something to be considered as a “norm,” two things are thus required: (a) a mutual interaction between the “objectivation” of values and the “subjectivation” of individuals (the process of establishing and maintaining a particular relationship to the self, a particular way of regarding yourself); (b) a mutual interaction between “individualization techniques” and “totalization procedures” (Foucault, 1983: 213). And this brings us to one more important aspect of Foucault’s anti-normativism.

What many considered to be an “ethical turn” in Foucault’s intellectual trajectory has to be seen in close connection to the idea of resistance to “biopolitical normalization”, a complex concept that both integrates and expands Foucault’s previous reflections on the functioning of disciplinary power in precise institutional frameworks such as the asylum or the prison (Le Blanc, 2006: 122-123; 158, and Legrand, 2007: 255). In my view, the most important thing about the “final” Foucault is his strong emphasis on the idea of human freedom, lacking from or being only implicit in his previous genealogies of power that seemed to portray a dark, hopeless image of our social reality as a huge “asylum” or carceral system.

[P]ower relations are possible only insofar as the subjects are free...if there are relations of power in every social field, this is because there is freedom everywhere. (Foucault, 1997: 292)

Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free. (Foucault, 1983: 221)

But what could “freedom” mean for Foucault? We know that he has always avoided answering questions in terms of “what is x?”. Nonetheless, I suspect this to be the key for understanding the proper ethical meaning of Foucault’s “aesthetics of existence.” I think it is clear that Foucault doesn’t operate with a traditional concept of “free will” and that he doesn’t conceive freedom as being the essential property of a Kantian rational and autonomous subject (if he had done this, then he would have implicitly embraced a kind of humanism that he actually rebuffed on more than one occasion): “Rather than speaking of an essential freedom, it would be better to speak of an *agonism* – of a relationship which is at the same time reciprocal incitation and struggle” (Foucault, 1983: 222). So when Foucault talks about the “complicated interplay” between power and freedom I guess he is referring to a perpetual

conflict but also co-dependence of something like two basic impulses or drives of any given individual (I admit that using words like “impulse” or “drive” may seem *risqué* if we think of Foucault's analysis of the “modern dispositive of sexuality”): the impulse of determining or controlling the conduct of others and the impulse to always say “no” – an inborn stubbornness or tendency to disobey, this being the primary “negative” meaning of freedom.

Such a seemingly “irrational” conception of freedom is extremely close to Sartre's view of freedom as an ekstastic original movement:

For the for-itself, to be is to nihilate the in-itself which it is. Under these conditions freedom can be nothing other than this nihilation. It is through this that the for-itself escapes its being as its essence; it is through this that the for-itself is always something other than what can be said of it. (Sartre, 1993: 439)

Foucault never mentions Sartre in this context, but it is my impression that his own intellectual path led him in an aria much closer to Sartre's problematizations of ethics and personal freedom than Foucault himself would have wanted to acknowledge, due to personal and philosophical reasons having to do with their old intellectual rivalry, dating back from the time of the publication of Foucault's bestseller *The Order of Things* (1966).

I have mentioned a rather “negative,” pre-reflexive meaning of freedom, making us capable at any moment to reject not only discipline or conformism, but also any old image of our own selves or prior commitments. But maybe we could also recognize, drawing on Foucault, a more “positive” meaning of freedom, in order to give a concrete solution to the permanent clash between normalizing power and personal freedom. Perhaps the only point of resistance to a disciplinary power externally exercised over us and also to our own “inner” impulse to control the conduct of others remains the reconversion or reorientation of this impulse of power toward our very own “self”; in other words, *the power of one's freedom* as free choice of another “way of life,” of another “discipline of life,” of another ethics than the moralizing and hollow discourse proffered in public space, urging us to be “normal,” that is to think and act as “they” do. And I think this would explain Foucault's definition of ethics as nothing else than “the conscious (*réfléchi*) practice of freedom” (Foucault, 1997: 287). However, it is my opinion that, according to Foucault, this freedom remains, in its primary meaning, something of an “instinct”: a pre-reflexive and ekstastic movement (to use Sartre's words).

And it is because this primary meaning can never be “sublated” (*aufgehoben*) that we cannot have some sort of dialectical closure in a tripartite structure such as: power – freedom – power *of* freedom. It is this remnant, this “wholly other” of one’s personal freedom that makes any kind of ethico-aesthetic subjectivation “an ephemeral, never to be completed work-in-progress” (O’Leary, 2002: 133)¹. And yet it is this same remnant that guarantees that no biopolitical subjectivation is ever definitive or irreversible.

I have already mentioned Sartre and I wish to add that he was one of the thinkers that contributed the most to impose anti-normativism as a significant trend in French contemporary moral philosophy. For instance, in Sartre’s famous October 1945 lecture *L’Existentialisme est un Humanisme*, we already find expressed the belief that code-based ethics claiming universal validity is dead, followed by a proposed analogy between the ethical situation and the aesthetic one:

No rule of general morality can show you what you ought to do”; “let us say that the moral choice is comparable to the construction of a work of art... does anyone reproach an artist when he paints a picture for not following rules established *a priori*? Does one ever ask what is the picture that he ought to paint?... As everyone knows, there are no aesthetic values *a priori*, but there are values which will appear in due course in the coherence of the picture, in the relation between the will to create and the finished work. No one can tell what the painting of tomorrow will be like; one cannot judge a painting until it is done. What has that to do with morality? We are in the same creative situation. We never speak of a work of art as irresponsible... There is this in common between art and morality, that in both we have to do with creation and invention. We cannot decide *a priori* what it is that should be done. (Sartre, 2001: 35; 41)

I argue that in order to have a suitable appraisal of Foucault’s aesthetics of existence we have to link this somehow Sartrean understanding of freedom to Nietzsche’s demand for a “stylization” of the existence. What is at stake is the need for acquiring some dispositions and thus imposing a degree of steadiness in one’s life. But contrary to the goal of ancient virtue ethics, Nietzsche’s patterns of conduct are only “brief habits”:

Brief habits.– I love brief habits and consider them an inestimable means for getting to know *many* things and states, down to the bottom of their sweetness and bitternesses... I always believe that here is something that will give me lasting satisfaction—brief habits, too, have this faith of passion, this faith in eternity... But one day its time is up; the good thing parts from me, not as something that has come to nauseate me but peacefully and sated with me as I am with it— as if we had

reason to be grateful to each other as we shook hands to say farewell. (Nietzsche, 1974 [1882]: 236-237)

In my view, Foucault inherits from Nietzsche this tension between the ideal of self-creation understood as living our lives as “works of art without an author” (Agamben, 2004: 613) and the demand for permanent “unsettlement” and continuous experimentation, the latter being proved by his repeated statement that “taking distance on oneself” (*se déprendre de soi-même*) – the attempt of “thinking otherwise than before” – should be considered “the ethic of an intellectual in our day” (Flynn, 2005: 617). And this may seem like a *double bind* but it is actually the consequence of the fact that there is no such thing as a complete or “totalizing” subjectivation.² So Nietzsche’s idea of “brief habits” might prove to be the key to harmonizing the demand for stylistic unity of one’s existence and the need for self-distancing.

At this stage of my argument I hope to have clearly shown that the “ethical turn” from Foucault’s final years must be understood in close connection with the problematization of power relations, regarding public morality as a factor of normalization and denouncing the pitfalls of the pop culture of authenticity (Foucault, 2005: 251-252). So it can be said that the goal of his entire life and work is ultimately an ethical and political one. Taking into account the two meanings of freedom already distinguished, we may talk of a “negative” and an “affirmative” aim that are strongly interconnected in his entire work. On the one hand, there is this permanent striving to take distance from a “self” which is merely the historical correlate of disciplinary techniques combined with scientific forms of classification. However, Foucault is extremely clear in rejecting the popular view according to which power is essentially repressive: “there is always subjectivation in subjection” (Legrand, 2007: 221) and this is why we are entitled to speak of a biopolitical subjectivation. Talking about “voluntary servitude” is not quite right, we have to acknowledge the *active* participation of a subject in a process that “forces the individual back on himself and ties him to his own identity in a constraining way” (Foucault, 1983: 212). On the other hand, there is this “affirmative” attempt to constitute “an ethics and an aesthetics of the self” fitted for our times, a goal that at some point Foucault judged to be “an urgent, fundamental and politically indispensable task, if it is true after all that there is no first or final point of resistance to political power other than in the relationship one has to oneself” (Foucault, 2005: 252).³

But then again, we have to be aware of the fact that any kind of ethico-aesthetic subjectivation will involve a mode of subjection and self-discipline, a kind of self-imposed bending to rules of conduct that one finds to be true or appealing (Foucault, 1993: 209).

SOURCES OF FOUCAULT'S AESTHETICS OF EXISTENCE. A CONTEMPORARY ALTERNATIVE: RORTY'S AESTHETIC LIFE

Following these general remarks I shall proceed to investigate Foucault's precise idea of an aesthetics of existence starting from its sources. A major modern source already mentioned is Nietzsche's ideal of a "great style" of self-creation, laid out in a famous paragraph from *The Gay Science* (section 290):

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. (Nietzsche, 1974 [1882]: 232)

There is no doubt that Nietzsche was the most important influence for Foucault, as he acknowledged it in his last interview (1988b: 250-251), and that we may trace multiple resemblances between Nietzsche's critique of moral philosophy or ethical universalism and the implications of Foucault's idea of an aesthetics of existence for ethical thought (Huijer, 1999). However, we should not neglect the existence of some major differences: the emphasis on personal freedom against Nietzsche's *amor fati* (although the latter should also be carefully approached); the communitarian dimension of Foucault's aesthetics of existence, as we shall see below, against Nietzsche's hyper-individualism; and also the fact that "there are no signs anywhere in Foucault's work of the Nietzschean dichotomy between lower and higher people (slaves and masters)" (Huijer, 1999: 78).

Another important modern source of inspiration is surely to be found in Kierkegaard's considerations about the aesthetical stage (*Either Or*) and the will to create oneself as a kind of "despair in defiance" (*Sickness unto Death*). Fr. Gros, the editor of Foucault's last courses, provides us, in a note to *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, with an interesting and less known inside information: "Foucault was a great reader of Kierkegaard, although he hardly ever mentions this author, who nonetheless had for him an importance as secret as it was decisive" (Foucault, 2005: 23). The big difference lies, of course, in the fact that what was once considered

by Kierkegaard (1980: 67-74) a form of “Promethean” or “demonic” despair in defiance of God becomes, for Foucault, the only ethico-aesthetical ideal suitable for our own historical age.

Apart from these modern sources, I argue that the the most relevant source is in fact Foucault's rediscovery of ancient Greek and Latin ethics under the sign of the Socratic principle of “care of the self,” as we shall see right away. But before that, let's take into consideration that we may often find associated Foucault's search for an “aesthetics of existence” conceived as a contemporary response to the Socratic principle of “care of the self” with Rorty's plea for *self-creation* and the idea of “aesthetic life”. However, the Rortyan project is synonymous to a strictly private ethics of “self-enlargement” in the footsteps of Nietzschean philosophy and in direct opposition to philosophical or Christian ascetics focused on the ideal of “self-purification” (Rorty, 1989; 1991a). It is “the life of unending curiosity, the life that seeks to extend its own bounds rather than to find its center” (Rorty, 1991a: 154).

As Shusterman (1992) has argued, Rorty's conception is rather some kind of cross-fertilization between liberal individualism and Romantic aesthetics, based on a clear and sharp separation between the private and the public sphere. We find out that the ultimate motivation for the kind of aesthetic life Rorty is pleading for, that is “the desire to embrace more and more possibilities,” actually reduces itself to “the acquisition of new vocabularies of moral reflection” (1991a: 154). In other words, it is about finding new ways of describing one's “actions and self-image in a more freshly appealing and richer way,” rather than “actual experiments in living” (Shusterman, 1992: 238). Shusterman also suggests that Rorty practically confuses the aesthetic value with the radical novelty, thus being unable to grasp the Foucauldian true meaning of an “aesthetics of existence” (Rorty, 1991b).

Rorty's vision of the aesthetic life has been criticized for its isolation in the private sphere, its narrowing focus on language and high cultural texts, and its consequent failure to engage with popular artforms and robustly embodied experience. (Shusterman, 2001: 104-105)

More than that, Rorty's ideal of “self-enrichment” or “self-enlargment” was seen by the proponents of critical theory as nothing else than the intellectual counterpart of the late capitalist cult for consumption.

AN AESTHETICS OF EXISTENCE UNDER THE SIGN
OF SOCRATIC “SELF-CARE”.
MORALITY AND PRACTICE OF THE SELF

In contrast to Rorty’s “aesthetic life,” it would seem that Foucauldian “aesthetics of existence” exits the framework of modern individualism (Foucault, 1986: 41-43), implying a definite *communitarian* dimension that is proved by Foucault’s return to the Socratic principle of “self-care” (*epimeleiaheautou*) conceived as “an intensification of social relations” (Foucault, 1986: 53) and a true “motor for political action” (Gros, 2005: 701). As I was saying before, in Foucault’s view, an “ethics of the self” in the shape of an aesthetics of existence seems to remain the only focus of resistance to disciplinary power, involving, on the one hand, resistance to biopolitical “normalization” or social conformism and, on the other hand, resistance to isolation or estrangement, to “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” (Foucault, 1983: 211-212).

So we may take it as a guiding principle that “for Foucault, the aesthetics of existence always takes place in, and responds to, a community and defines itself in terms of its attachments to, or ruptures with, that community” (McGushin 2007: 301).⁴

Fr. Gros (2004: 20) has pointed out the fact that Foucault’s gradually increased interest in ethics during the 80s involved the study of three historically distinct ways of ethical subjectivation (*i.e.* self-constitution through a particular relation to a discourse recognized as being the “truth”): the *confession* or the Christian hermeneutics of the self, the Greek and Roman philosophical *care of the self* and the Cynical *parrhêsia* or fearless speech. Leaving aside the question of *parrhêsia*, it is important to notice the contrast between the “split,” “divided” (*coupé*) subject of the paradoxical Christian ethics and the ethical subject of Greek and Roman philosophical care of the self. The latter would be synonymous to a self “simply ahead of itself (*décalé*),” *i.e.* whose separation from itself is not that of a mystery ultimately inaccessible for rational knowledge (we may call it “personhood,” although Foucault’s analysis lacks any reference to this fundamental Christian notion), but only the “distance of a work (*oeuvre*) to accomplish: the work of life (*oeuvre de vie*)” (Gros, 2005: 705).

We understand that the self envisaged by Foucault in his reading of Ancient ethics is not something like an *original* secret that has to be

excavated from the depths of one's soul, but rather a kind of exteriority, *afinal* work in relation to which the individual "as it is," that is without a proper education or philosophical "training" (*paraskenê*), stands in a kind of gap. In his lectures about Hellenistic and Roman ethics from 1982, Foucault calls this self a subject of "athletic concentration" and "ethical fortification" (Gros, 2005: 701), directly opposing it to the Christian (but also modern) subject of introspection.

In no way does it involve either opening up the subject as a field of knowledge (*connaissances*) or undertaking the subject's exegesis and decipherment... It involves, rather, calling for a teleological concentration. It involves the subject looking closely at his own aim... What separates us from the aim, the distance between oneself and the aim, should be the object, once again, not of a deciphering knowledge (*savoir*), but of an awareness, vigilance, and attention. Consequently, you see that what we should think about is, of course, an athletic kind of concentration. (Foucault, 2005: 222)

The idea of utmost importance from the point of view of the genealogy of the modern subject is that *epimeleiaheautou* or philosophical ascesis, in their original meaning, would not have been about self-discovery, but rather would have involved *self-creation* or self-fashioning. So the challenging alternative our modern "simplified expressivism" (Taylor, 2007: 475) is confronted to, instead of the objectification of the subject through confession, is "the subjectivation of a true discourse in a practice and exercise of oneself on oneself" (Foucault, 2005: 333).⁵

I have already mentioned the communitarian dimension of Socratic, Stoic, or Epicurean self-care, and we should never lose from sight the fact that the ethical subject of this complex practice is not some solitary, misanthropic or narcissistic individual, but the human being able to see his own existence as a raw material that needs to be shaped or balanced through the complete assimilation of the moral precepts he judges to be true. The ultimate practical goal was to give shape or "style" to your life, but not for the sake of the appearances or from a vain desire to seduce, to astound others with your originality, grace and nonchalance; the real ethico-aesthetic purpose was to finally escape that "perpetual restlessness of the soul, mind, and attention" that Seneca named *stultitia* (Foucault, 2005: 344).

This is the real sense of the "aesthetics of existence": not... the exultation of dandyism – but the effort to make visible in the flow of existence the principles of action, the *logoi*... Care of the self aims, through a series of techniques..., to instill a

harmony between *logoi* and *erga*... The desired *harmonic* correspondence is discovered precisely in this: the relation between acts and words. (Gros, 2005: 704)

We may agree that Foucault's goal in discussing Greek and Latin ethics wasn't historical accuracy or its contemporary resuscitation, like in the case of the significant revival of virtue ethics in the field of Anglo-American moral philosophy over the last decades, mainly as a reaction to a pervasive utilitarianism and a rigid legalistic deontology (Crisp and Slote, 1997). As P. Veyne has pointed out, Foucault was for the most part interested in one element, "namely the idea of a work of the self on the self," that he estimated "to be capable of reacquiring a contemporary meaning" in the context of an aesthetics of existence that emphasizes the freedom to invent new styles of existence:

The idea of styles of existence played a major role in Foucault's conversations and doubtless in his inner life during the final months of a life that only he knew to be threatened. *Style* does not mean distinction here; the word is to be taken in the sense of the Greeks, for whom an artist was first of all an artisan and a work of art was first of all a work. (Veyne, 1997: 231)

We may now approach Foucault's view of morality. In his Introduction to *The Use of Pleasures*, Foucault distinguishes between three different uses of the word "morality": (a) a moral code, (b) the real behavior of individuals, and also (c) the way to "conduct oneself," to form oneself as an ethical subject by establishing and maintaining a specific relationship to the self. Foucault's claim is that we should reserve the term "ethics" to designate this last dimension of morality (1990: 25-26).

Ethics thus defined implies four aspects or coordinates that Deleuze proposed to be understood as "four foldings, four folds of subjectivation". Foucault would have coined these elements by analogy with the Aristotelian doctrine of the four causes (Deleuze, 1988: 104).

(1) The "*determination of the ethical substance*". Which is the material to work upon? Which part of himself must the individual constantly examine and "bent back in order to become a relation to oneself" (Deleuze, 1988: 104): our acts, our desires, our intentions, our feelings?

(2) The "*mode of subjection (assujettissement)*". In an ethical (not strictly political) context, the subjection depends greatly on a particular understanding of the character and status of the rules of conduct. At this point, although he is strictly referring to the example of conjugal fidelity, I think Foucault (1990: 27) let us see that there are actually many different

ways to understand the nature of a moral rule: as a divine commandment, as a law of universal Reason, as a norm arising from the “contractual” regulation of our living together, as a “teleological injunction” (expression used by MacIntyre) aiming at self-realization, personal happiness or social welfare, as “an aesthetic principle of existence,” etc. More than this, it is my impression that Foucault holds that this is a list of (metaethical) possibilities that has to remain open: not only the ways of conduct, but also the ways of understanding the character of the rules of conduct must be multiple and diverse, if we want ethics to remain what it arguably was since its beginnings, that is “the practice of freedom”.

(3) The “*ethical work (travail éthique)* that one performs on oneself”. This is the properly speaking ethical field (from the Greek *éthos*) that finds itself “repressed” from the modern moral philosophy, a philosophy focused on moral codes and systems of norms designed to measure the real behavior of individuals. It involves the “spiritual exercises” (P. Hadot) or “techniques of the self” such as “techniques of meditation, of memorization of the past, of examination of conscience, of checking representations which appear in the mind, and so on” (Foucault, 2005: 11).

(4) Finally, we have to take into consideration the “*telos* of the ethical subject” and be aware of the plurality of “ultimate” goals that were presented to individuals by various spiritual and philosophical traditions during the history of mankind: salvation, immortality, self-mastery, freedom, serenity, happiness, etc.

[A] relationship with the self... is not simply ‘self-awareness’ but self-formation as an ‘ethical subject’, a process in which the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the precept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal. And this requires him to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself. (Foucault, 1990: 28)

It becomes clear that Foucault’s conceptual scheme of ethical subjectivation is designed to make us overcome a common prejudice regarding morality as a system of rules aiming to limit our freedom, to restrain us, to constrain us to act in socially acceptable ways. As previously shown, for Foucault, ethics is nothing else than “the conscious (*réfléchiè*) practice of freedom,” and “this *éthos* of freedom is also a way of caring for others” (Foucault, 1997: 284; 287). Its original goal is to make us understand *how free we really are*, instead of forcing us to obey an allegedly universal moral code: free to choose a specific kind of relationship to the

self, to transform a particular aspect of our conduct into the object of moral evaluation, to understand differently the nature of moral rules, to ethically train ourselves in different ways, and, finally, to set for ourselves different stakes or goals that are morally desirable, which motivate us in our daily efforts to become better.

Foucault forces us to acknowledge the historically proven plurality of ways of conceiving ethics, the “self,” the teleology of the moral subject; he exposes us to a variety of “arts of life” and “styles” of existence developed in the West, in order to invite us to find appropriate forms for the present political and social context of taking care of us and our fellows, of leading together a “good life”.

LEVELS OF ANALOGY BETWEEN ETHICS AND AESTHETICS

Embracing a suggestion made by Th. O’Leary (2002), I argue that what we should understand from Foucault’s conception of ethics as an art or aesthetics of existence is not a view of one’s life as a perfect or finished work of art; we should try instead to think the relationship to the self, the work on the self, and the “good life” in a closer analogy to the way the process of artistic creation goes.

This means we have to distinguish “between work as a product (*oeuvre*) and work as a process (*travail*)” (O’Leary, 2002: 127): it is not something like the “phenomenal perfection” or the beautiful appearance that would have become an ethical ideal in the “post-duty” age, but the idea of ethical work or *askesis* aiming at self-creation, grasped by analogy with the way an artist relates to his or her own art, to the creative process of a work of life.⁶

I think we can draw on Foucault in order to propose multiple levels of developing a complex analogy between the relationship of an artist to his or her work and the relationship of an ethical subject to his or her life and conduct. Space allows me to only make a few suggestions on this crucial point.

(a) The puzzling philosophical alternative “self-discovery” vs. “self-invention” becomes practically irrelevant in the process of ethico-aesthetic subjectivation, when this is compared to the process of artistic creation: an artist would never measure the degree up to which her work is an expression of his “true” self or a way of distancing or running from himself (*JE est un autre*) by inventing imaginary words and multiple characters.

(b) The postmodern rhetoric of embracing difference and alterity risks being void without being sustained by a genuine care of really becoming “another” (*un autre*), somehow similar to an artist's concern to experiment different ways of artistic expression or different styles (Nietzsche's idea of “brief habits,” mentioned above, may prove itself to be an excellent bridge between ethics and aesthetics).

(c) An ethics or “aesthetics of existence” without universal rules of conduct resembles an artistic “work for which no eternal principles of good taste can be deduced. We, like the artist, have no model to follow which will guarantee a good, or a beautiful, result” (O'Leary, 2002: 132). As the aesthetic taste calls for some kind of *sensus communis*, an artist needs to form his or her audience, is in vital need for recognition; same is the case for a personal ethics in the shape of an “aesthetics of existence,” implying an irreducible community dimension, as I have argued before, following McGushin and Gros.

(d) Any great artist (let's say, a great painter) goes through different stages or periods of creation and experiments a number of different styles during his or her lifetime, receiving influences and influencing in his turn the other artists of the time. But when visiting a retrospective art exhibition, it is quite easy to recognize the common thread of her or his works, the major themes, and the stylistic impress; in other words, it is not difficult to say about a Picasso from any given period: “This is a Picasso!” Likewise, maybe this “ephemeral, never to be completed work-in-progress” (O'Leary, 2002: 133) that is a projective “self” can only become subject to retrospective consideration: it is nothing but the “precipitate” of numerous variations, serious games, “brief habits,” and experiments with oneself. In other words, nothing but some “sediment” of our guiding ideas and existential commitments.

There is irony in those efforts one makes to alter one's way of looking at things, to change the boundaries of what one knows and to venture out a ways from there. Did mine actually result in a different way of thinking? Perhaps at most they made it possible to go back through what I was already thinking, to think it differently, and to see what I had done from a new vantage point and in a clearer light. Sure of having traveled far, one finds that one is looking down on oneself from above (*On croyait s'éloigner et on se trouve à la verticale de soi-même*). The journey rejuvenates things, and ages the relationship with oneself. (Foucault, 1990: 11)⁷

(e) The process of artistic creation cannot be thought of in terms of the opposition egoism/altruism. An artist creates at the same time for himself and for the others, for his audience; same is the case with

Socratic-Foucauldian “care of the self,” involving the care for the others as well. As Seneca once said, “no one can live happily who has regard to himself alone and transforms everything into a question of his own utility; you must live for your neighbour, if you would live for yourself (*alterivivasoportet, sivistibivivere*)” (Seneca, 1917: 315).

FINAL REMARKS

I hope to have convincingly argued that Foucault’s aesthetic of existence has an undeniable ethical meaning, equally involving the relationship to the self and the relationship with others in the process of ethico-aesthetic subjectivation. Although also inspired by Renaissance self-fashioning, 19th century dandyism, Kierkegaard or Nietzsche, the aesthetic of existence, as conceived by Foucault, remains rooted in the ancient understanding of “self-care,” at the same time allowing new challenging developments fitted for our “post-duty” historical age, by way of analogy with the process of artistic making. Before ending, I would like to briefly answer a few possible questions regarding the status of this aesthetics of living.

(a) First of all: is it moral relativism? In a way, yes, because it denies the possibility of a universal moral theory compelling to all individuals and implicitly rejects the ideal of “reflective equilibrium”. However, we shouldn’t neglect the fact that Foucault always rejected the charges of irrationalism and relativism. At one time he confessed to P. Veyne that the problem for him was not that there is no universal truth, but: “how is it that there is so little truth in truth? (*d'où vient que la vérité soit si peu vraie?*)” (Veyne, 1997: 231). I think we could even state that in Foucault’s view, each and every art of life or manner of ethical subjectivation has its entitlement and its part of truth.

(b) But is it moral particularism? Not in the “Oxford” sense (McDowell, Dancy, McNaughton), according to which moral particularism is a theory that holds on to the fundamental principle of modern moral philosophy – “right over good” –, focusing on the procedures to decide which actions are morally right and which are wrong, only to claim that moral judgment cannot rely on general rules and that it requires a particular understanding of a situation. Dancy (1993) goes on to argue that moral justification is “narrative” in its essence, rather than argumentative. As for Foucault, I think it is clear that he assumes that morality, even in the narrow sense of “ethics” as relationship to the self, cannot dispense with

rules. On the contrary, the mode of subjection is indispensable for the ethical work on ourselves. But I think he also assumes two crucial points: that morality is not only about rules, and that there is no single way of understanding the nature of the moral rules.

(c) Then it is postmodern? Yes, in the general sense that an aesthetics of existence cannot be grounded on a metanarrative (Lyotard's *grand récits*). But not in the distinctive sense of Z. Bauman's "postmodern ethics" (1993; 2008), an ethics focused not on "self-care," but on abnegation and Judeo-Christian "being-for-the-Other".

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Notes

¹ As Th. O'Leary convincingly argues, Foucault's major concern was to find theoretical and practical ways of "continually breaking the limits of the rigid, object-like forms of subjectivity which are given to us by our culture – even when these forms are self-imposed" (2002: 133).

² If an ethico-aesthetic subjectivation could ever be total or complete, this would imply that subjectivation is nothing else than subjection (*assujettissement*). And this is certainly not true for Foucault and his emphasis on personal freedom, although it is quite true, as we shall see below, that ethico-aesthetic subjectivation also involves different modes of subjection, in other words, different understandings and functions of those rules of conduct that we choose to instill in our lives through particular practices of the self. So I would reject P. Veyne's claim that we should distinguish between subjectivation ("a kind of socialization") and an "aestheticization" conceived as "freedom's initiative" (Veyne, 2008: 174-175). Besides the fact that there are actually many references in Foucault's texts to ethical or ethico-aesthetical subjectivation, such an interpretation would simplify or conceal the "complicated interplay" between power and freedom in our lives.

³ P. Veyne offers an excellent corollary to this fundamental point: "if the self frees us from the idea that between morality and society, or what we call by those names, there is an analytic or necessary link, then it is no longer necessary to wait for the revolution to begin to realize ourselves: the self is the new strategic possibility" (1997: 231).

⁴ Even a commentator such as A. Thacker, which is not entirely sympathetic to Foucault's proposal – where he depicts a kind of double bind between a notion of the aesthetic that "seems to owe much to a Kantian notion of art as universal and yet simultaneously subjective" (Thacker, 1993: 14), and a negation of the aesthetic autonomy that is rooted in the Greek ideal of the beautiful-good (*kaloskagathos*) – acknowledges that "aestheticisation might lead to a 'predatory' relation to others, but it might equally lead to an imaginative and sympathetic relation to them via intersubjective discussion of what actions are to be regarded as beautiful, stylish and good" (1993: 15).

⁵ Another way of formulating this major difference is the following: instead of a "hermeneutical" self, a "gnomic" self (Foucault, 1993: 209-210).

⁶ I think this also answers Thacker's objection that I mentioned above.

⁷ At this stage, we may remind ourselves of Kierkegaard who, despite his critical judgment of the idea of aesthetic life and self-creation, explicitly brought forth a conception of the self or of the fact of becoming oneself, authentic self, as a kind of "movement in the same place": "the progress of the becoming must be an infinite moving away from itself in the infinitizing of the self, and an infinite coming back to itself in the finitizing process" (Kierkegaard, 1980: 30).