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Deep Ethical Pluralism in Late Foucault

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Abstract

In the essay "What is Enlightenment?" (1983), Foucault espouses a novel and emancipatory "philosophical ethos" which challenges individuals to undertake an ongoing, aesthetic project of total self-transformation (*de prendre de soi meme*). By advocating a view of the self---and more accurately the relationship one has to oneself (rappot a soi)--as a free creation on the part of the subject, Foucault seems to be espousing a pluralistic ethical position. However, I argue that while this interpretation is not entirely false, it is not altogether accurate either. Quite simply, it is too broad in scope. Instead, I argue that Foucault's philosophical ethos is best described as a Deep Ethical Pluralist (DEP) position. Furthermore, I demonstrate that the two most common objections to Foucault's new ethos for the contemporary subject in the secondary literature, namely the regressive and dandyist objections miss their mark precisely because they are successful only against ethical pluralism but not DEP.

Section I: Foucault's Philosophical Ethos and Deep Ethical Pluralism

Michel Foucault urges his readers to adopt a new "attitude towards modernity" or "philosophical ethos" in his 1983 essay "What is Enlightenment?" (Foucault, 1990, 39) As Foucault explains, such an ethos would involve a specific, "mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, a way of thinking and feeling; a way too of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task." (Foucault, 1990, 39)[1] Moreover this task, Foucault claims, would mark an exit of sorts towards maturity. Much like Kant 200 years earlier in his own essay of the same title *Was ist Aufklarung,* Foucault too it seems, is challenging and imploring human beings to "grow up."

However, the similarities between the two philosophers seem to stop there. Despite having identical titles for their papers, there is a good deal of difference between Kant and Foucault's respective philosophical attitudes towards the Enlightenment and

subsequent ethical views founded thereon. While Kant challenged his readers to rely on their own reason rather than blindly following authority and tradition, Foucault challenges the twenty-first century subject to adopt an aesthetic-ascetic mode of existence in which we re-create, transform and experiment with the relationship to ourselves (rapport a soi) as if the subject was nothing more than a work of art. Thus, while Kant stressed that the "enlightened" individual would be aware of the limits to human knowledge and understanding and stay within these limits, Foucault's concern "will be to experiment with the possibility of going beyond them." (Foucault, 1990, 50) In effect, Foucault's new ethos of and for the modern subject is a defense and celebration of 'Deep Ethical Pluralism.'

Summarily defined here, I will use the term Deep Ethical Pluralism (hereafter DEP) to denote the normative ethical position which holds that individuals *ought* to engage in an ongoing, arduous and aesthetic practice (*askesis)* of total self-transformation or what Foucault calls (a *deprendre de soi meme*). It should also be noted that DEP has *some* affinities with Ethical Pluralism in general. Roughly, Ethical Pluralism (hereafter EP) may be defined as the normative position which holds that: (i) there is a plurality of norms; (ii) that such norms are incommensurable with other norms; there is no elemental set of norms which are universal for all; with the exception of one norm, criterion (iii) which stipulates that an individual is free to choose any norms he or she wishes to live by provided that they do not infringe on the freedom of other individuals to live by the norms that they have decided to adopt. In the following paper, I argue that the two most common objections to Foucault's ethos as seen in the secondary literature (what I call the regressive and dandyism objections) are criticisms that are only problematic for EP and not for DEP. For the Deep Ethical Pluralist, is

committed to the first three tenants of EP plus a fourth: iv) every individual *ought* to engage in aesthetic-ascetic practice (*askesis)* of total self-transformation. Since many scholars fail to make this distinction as I have done here between EP and DEP, their scathing objections to Foucault's new contemporary ethos of the modern subject miss their mark.

Section II: The Regressive Objection

I call the first group of Foucault's critics the "progressive camp" since according to them the late Foucault's entire so called 'turn' towards the subject marks a regression to a pre-Kantian and pre-Enlightenment mode of ethical thinking. This group includes such scholars as Jurgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, Nancy Fraser and others.[2] However, Thomas McCarthy is clearly the group's most forceful and articulate spokesperson. In McCarthy's article, "The Critique of Impure Reason" he writes: "Foucault's representation of universal morality, geared as it is to substantive codes, misses the point of formal, procedural models, namely to establish a general framework of justice within which individuals and groups may pursue different conceptions of the good or beautiful life." (McCarthy, 1994, 270) Therefore, McCarthy concludes: "Foucault's aesthetic individualism is no more adequate to this social dimension of autonomy than was the possessive individualism of early modern political theory." (McCarthy, 1994, 271)

According to McCarthy et al. Foucault simply misunderstands the import of Kant's ethical revolution. Unlike the earlier social contract theorists who predicated their ethical theory on the ontological primacy and self-interest of the individual, Kant, instead, starts with those universal and unconditionally binding *a priori* rules and

imperatives generated by "the autonomous will." Thus, Kant reverses the starting point of all ethical direction hitherto: the material ethicists start with the rights, interests and values of the individual and then try to build an ethics for the community that would guarantee these interests. Kant, on the other hand, underscores the theoretical or formal ethical imperatives that all rational creatures possess and must follow in order for *any act to be* moral regardless of the context, setting or community in which one finds themselves. Thus, it is to "act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time *will* that it should become a universal law," that truly is the *sine qua non* that grants full participation in what Kant will later call "the Kingdom of Ends"; the kingdom of moral persons. (Kant, 1998) In other words, only by respecting the wishes of others (treating the other as an end in themselves and never solely as means to our end) can we further our *own ends* as persons. Thus, according to the progressive camp, the categorical imperative along with its many formulations and interpretations marks the first step for establishing guidelines towards true distributive justice for all individuals.

Yet Foucault, (or so the progressive camp argues,) seemingly fails to understand any of this. Instead, Foucault regresses to an Ethical Pluralist position in that it is impossible to have an *external,* universal, and absolute moral law which would regulate the actions of subjects. Instead each individual in a society is now on an island onto themselves completely engaged in his or her own total self-transformation But if the individual is merely concerned with his or her own 'development,' then it becomes very difficult, as Rainer Rochlitz puts it, "to question the existing social system in any real way, since he has no form of organization to substitute for it." (Rochlitz, 1991, 255) Though an individual may act ethically and genuinely care

about other individuals, such actions are only considered ethical according to the specific individual in question. In short, Foucault does not seem to propose any *formal* ethical rules that would apply to all individuals across the board nor any procedural manner of resolving ethical disputes between two or more individuals.

Section III: The Dandyist Objection

Turning to the second faction of critics, I call them the anti-dandyist camp. In sum, the anti-dandyists argue that even if we accept such an "aesthetics of existence" as Foucault calls it, Foucault cannot provide any normative guidelines whatsoever as to how one should practice such an artistic "care of the self." That is to say, Foucault's new ethos is vacuous insofar as Foucault does not and indeed *seemingly* cannot give any direction, from an *internal* standpoint, as to how one should transform one's self. Moreover, such a re-direction of ethics that advocates "the care of oneself" would seem to commit Foucault to a species of moral relativism or at the very least, a kind of dandyism whereby the individual is only concerned with his or her own intellectual, spiritual, or physical growth, etc. However, by placing such emphasis only on one's own aesthetic relationship to oneself, an individual may act unethically towards others if it suits this individual's peculiar and idiosyncratic ethos.

This second criticism is clearly articulated in the work of Peter Dews, Pierre Hadot and Rainer Rochlitz.[3] However, I think Richard Bernstein presents this critique in its clearest form. Bernstein writes: "For this way of speaking of ethics, which is now sharply distinguished from politics, *seems* to be radically individualistic and voluntaristic with no consideration of anything or any other beyond one's relationship to oneself." (Bernstein, 1994, 233) The danger here, according to this group of

scholars, is that Foucault's call for a new ascetic-aesthetic ethos for the modern subject, (in which the subject would "care for him or herself,") may lead one to stop caring about others.

So far, it appears that these objections are on target: Foucault does not seem to understand that Kant changes the ethical landscape by switching the emphasis from material ethics that stress the will and interest of the lone individual, to formal concerns that express the general or collective *Wille* of all rational creatures. While turning to the second critique, the late Foucault does seem to advocate a new species of Baudelairian dandyism at best and moral relativism at worst. The hallmark of Foucault's new ethos of the modern subject is to allow each and every individual to experiment and create a new relationship with themselves as they see fit according to each individual's aesthetic tastes and intuitions. However, if all of us were merely concerned with only further developing this relationship to ourselves without any regard for others, then we could all be venturing down on a very dangerous moral road indeed.

Section IV: *Askesis* and the Regressive Objection

Nevertheless, an important component of Foucault's philosophical ethos has largely been overlooked in the secondary literature that may answer the 'progressivist' charge, namely, the full meaning, and scope that Foucault gives to the ancient Greek word *askesis.* According to Foucault, *askesis* (at least in the fifth century B.C.) was far broader and indeed, richer in both scope and meaning than its Latin derivative *ascesis*. In the 1983 lectures given at Berkeley California, Foucault says that:

> Although our word "asceticism" derives from the Greek word "askesis" (since the meaning of the word changes as it becomes associated with various Christian practices), for the Greeks the word does not mean "ascetic", but has a very broad sense denoting any kind of practical training or exercise. (Foucault, 1983).

This broad sense of 'practical' training that Foucault speaks of includes both what we might call 'practice' in modern English as well as 'attitude.' In the second 1983 lecture, given at Berkeley, Foucault further explains the difference between the ancient Greek, fifth century notion of *askesis*, the ancient Roman notion of *ascesis* and how this latter notion was again re-interpreted by the early Christians. Foucault says:

> But the Greek conception of askesis differs from Christian ascetic practices in at least two ways: (1) Christian asceticism has its ultimate aim or target the renunciation of the self, whereas the moral askesis of the Greco-Roman philosophies has as its goal the establishment of a specific relationship to oneself – a relationship of self possession and self-sovereignty; (2) Christian asceticism takes as its principle theme detachment from the world, whereas the ascetic practices of the Greco-Roman philosophies are generally concerned with endowing the individual with the preparation and the moral equipment that will permit him to fully confront the world in an ethical and rational manner. (Foucault, 1983)

Thus, *askesis* does not simply mean "material practices of the self" or "techniques of self-fashioning" that are completely subjective, relative and 'aesthetic'. *Askesis* rather, (at least in the fifth century) also entailed the development, and as Foucault points out, the *strengthening* of that special relationship one has to oneself in order "that one may fully confront the world in an ethical and rational manner." One must understand what the *correct* course of ethical action would be in a concrete context while simultaneously possess the resolve and strength of character to commit oneself to this course of action in order to act ethically.

Indeed, both of these ethical components (what Foucault will call the elements of morality: the codes, maxims, in short the *nomoi* and the elements of *askesis:* the proper training, exercises and 'attitude') necessarily go hand in hand. One must not only understand what is just and unjust, what is morally right or wrong but one must also possess and develop the correct ethical "attitude" in order to act ethically. As Foucault writes in *The Use of Pleasure:* "Although the necessity of respecting the law and the customs—the *nomoi*—was very often underscored, more important than the content of the law and its conditions of application was the *attitude* that caused one to respect them." (Foucault, 1985, 31) Thus, according to Foucault, it is essential when discussing ethics to always, "keep in mind the distinction between the *code elements of morality* and the *elements of askesis*, neglecting neither their coexistence, their interrelations, their relative autonomy, nor their possible differences of emphasis." (Foucault, 1985, 31)

So what Foucault is highlighting in the above passage is obviously an important point of ethics that McCarthy, Habermas, et al. fail to remember: ethical thinking, ethical action, always implies a subject doing the thinking, and a subject performing the action. Ethics, in other words, is always self-reflexive; an ethical 'ought' implies appropriate action by the subject who is engaged in both the contemplation of what moral action he or she should take and then the commitment to take *this specific* action. Ethical thinking and ethical action is a self-reflexive activity such that one cannot be truly ethical, Foucault thinks, unless one is committed to renewing those practices of the self which allow us to be ethical. Foucault emphasizes this last point on the preceding pages from *The Use of Pleasure*:

> In short, for an action to be "moral," it must not be reducible to an act or a series of acts conforming to a rule, a law, or a value… There is no specific moral action that does not refer to a unified moral conduct; no moral conduct that does not call for the forming of oneself as an ethical subject; and no forming of an ethical subject without "modes of subjectivation" and an "ascetics" or "practices of the self" that support them. (Foucault, 1985, 28)

Contrary to those in the progressive camp then, Foucault is not regressing to a pre-Kantian conception of ethics. Rather, Foucault is simply *emphasizing* an essential aspect of ethics that one often forgets: that it is always a subject that *acts*, and therefore it is always a specific subject who must possess the moral strength of character in order to act ethically in a specific situation. Moreover, a perquisite to ensure that one has the moral strength of character to act ethically is to posses and further develops one's attitude towards the ethical. That is, one must practice for an "ethics" daily and be open to change this 'practice' as required according to new circumstances. Thus, the philosophical "ethos" Foucault advocates in his later work can only be "experimental" as we are always confronting new, untold, ethical and social quandaries.

To return to the first criticism then, Foucault seems to be suggesting that an ethos that re-emphasizes the practices of the self that form the ethical subject cannot merely entail, very crudely put, "rule following" *a la* the deontologist nor evaluating the end consequences of our actions pace the consequentialist. One cannot establish formal rules of ethical behaviour without also changing the relationship one has to those very rules. One must continually practice *for* an ethics in order to be ethical while such a practice will necessarily involve an exercise on oneself by oneself.

In addition, the "ethical subject" that Foucault speaks of is neither 'permanent' nor 'atomic' in any sense that would be recognizable to 16th and 17th century social contract theorists. The subject, as Foucault makes clear, is best described as a *se deprendre de soi meme:* an active exercise of continual disassembling of the self by oneself. Our ethical task then, our "ethos" should not be one of returning to an ethics of and for the "atomic materialist individual" but rather to challenge, change and transform ourselves in order to form new *relations* to ourselves, to others and to our community. The self, therefore, is not 'indivisible' (*atomos, literally 'uncuttable')* rather it is *tomos* through and through. The self is a continual cutting, a dissection of sections. Ultimately, the 'self' is a 'reordering' of related parts that are always changing in relation to one's historical, and social reality.

Therefore, Foucault does not subscribe to a "material ethics" which glorifies and 'ontologizes' the individual sub species aeterni. The 'self' is not 'atomic': it is relational. The self is formed only through the practice of freely transforming oneself to become something else. As Foucault writes, the entire goal of his new philosophical ethos is to give "new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom." (Foucault, 1990, 46)

If we now turn to the second criticism, we find that it is still very much intact despite the above solution to the first problem. After all, it is possible to have the resolve and strength to carry through on what one thinks *ought* to be done and yet such an 'ought' is very far from being ethical. Thus, possessing and even further developing the "right resolve" to carry forward with an ethical 'ought' may be a necessary condition for

moral action but it is obviously not a sufficient condition. Thus, the anti-dandyists seem to be able to maintain that just because one seeks and acts to "disassemble the self", "strengthen the resolve of the self," and "care for the self" that this most certainly does not entail that this construction will be ethical.

Section V: *Parrhesia* and the Dandyist Objection

However, I think the last aspect of Foucault's new philosophical ethos, namely that of *parrhesia,* effectively defuses the dandyism critique. To be a parrhesiast, at least in the ancient Greco-Roman world, entailed not only being a truth-speaker, but also involved "having the courage to speak the truth in the face of some danger." (Foucault, 1983, 4).

Thus, to be a parrhesiast means to believe in both the truth and truthfulness to the point where one trusts "that there are different truths and different ways of speaking the truth." (Foucault, 1988, 51) Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, it ultimately means that one must possess such a hyper-commitment to the truth that one must allow all persons to participate in debates, discussions, or the like, even if we have good reason to believe that these persons are engaging in distorted forms of communication i.e. propaganda. Furthermore, we must also participate and speak 'our' distinct 'truth' no matter what consequences we may face as a result.

Now, I realize that it is this last component to Foucault's ethos that is surely the most problematic. Such a hyper-commitment to the truth in all its forms seems too flexible, naive or perhaps politically dangerous. Noam Chomsky for example, who incidentally

participated in a debate of sorts with Foucault in 1971, articulates the dangers of this position when he writes:

> It is a waste of time and pointless pursuit to speak the truth to Henry Kissinger, or the CEO of General Motors, or others who exercise power in coercive institutions—truths that they already know well enough, for the most part… These same people who wield power, are hardly worth addressing any more than the worst tyrants and criminals who are also human beings and should be held responsible for their crimes however terrible. (Chomsky, 1996, 61)

According to Foucault however, it is *far more dangerous* to adopt an approach that already excludes certain forms of communication, and persons from the outset than to allow even the most despicable "moral monsters" to use Chomsky's description of Kissinger, to express their so called "truths." It is precisely this sort of Neo-Gnostic thinking, so common in the 20th century as identified by Eric Vogelin, that must not be engaged. (Vogelin, 1952) Foucault's point, it seems is that it is only by making this prior commitment to speak the truth as plainly and simply as we can, to establish contact with other truth seekers and to be charitable in understanding their truths, (though we can disagree with these truths) which allows us to overcome Neo-Gnostic thinking.

Indeed, in Foucault's later years, he comes to view *parrhesia* as a moral duty both to oneself as well as to the other. As Foucault says in one of his very last lectures at Berkeley:

> To summarize the foregoing, parrhesia is a kind of verbal activity where the speaker has a specific relation to truth through frankness, a certain relationship to his own life through danger, a certain type of relation to himself or other people through criticism (self-criticism or criticism of other people), and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty. (Foucault, 1983)

Finally, it should also be clear by now, that such a relation to oneself, and contrary to Bernstein, must and *can* only be "voluntaristic." Only the individual can desire to develop such a relationship to him or herself: it cannot be forced or coerced. Only when individuals commit themselves to this ethos, and live such an ethos as a life-practice on a daily basis, is it possible that we may overcome many of the social and political injustices that plague modern society. As Foucault says in one his very last interviews:

> I don't believe there can be a society without relations of power, if you understand them as a means by which individuals try to conduct, to determine the behaviour of others. The problem is not trying to dissolve them in the utopia of a perfectly transparent communication, but to give one's self the rules of law, the techniques of management, and also the *ethics,* the *ethos*, *the practice of self* which would allow these games to be played with a minimum of domination. (My Italics) (Foucault, 1991, 118)

Turning to the charge of dandyism then, I think I have demonstrated that Foucault's return to an 'ethos' of *parrhesia*, clearly demonstrates that such an ascetic-aesthetic contemporary ethos does not shut individuals off into private cocoons of their own making. To be a parrhesiast in our modern contemporary society entails openness to the Other; a concern to understand the Other; a concern to help the Other; and, ultimately, a concern to *recognize* the autonomy of the Other even if this minimally means to make the Other aware of certain truths. As Foucault says, a person who practices "…*parrhesia* seals, ensures, and guarantees the other's autonomy, the autonomy of the person who received the speech from the person who uttered it."[4] To govern oneself in such a way so as to speak the truth to the other "in fear, without ornamentation" is to communicate to the other not just a truth, but also a potential danger, a challenge, a task and therefore is to recognize the other's independence,

freedom and in some sense his/her equality. Obviously, what specific danger or truth we should communicate or how such concern and what sort of help should be provided to this "other," cannot be stipulated beforehand: we can only act within a specific historical context and there is no amount of prior rule establishment that will guarantee that we are acting ethically. It is precisely for this reason that 'we', collectively, as subjects, must develop an ethos and not an ethics--we must develop a mode of relating to contemporary reality that presents itself as a task and life practice that can only be, as Foucault states, "experimental."

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NOTES

[1] Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 39. Also see "The Ethic of care for the self as a practice of freedom" in *The Final Foucault* ed. James Bernauer and David Rasmussen, (Cambridge Mass: MIT Press, 1991), 1-21 as well as "An Aesthetics of Existence in *Michel Foucault Politics, Philosophy, Culture Interviews and Other Writings,* 1977-1984 ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, (New York: Routledge, 1988) 47-57, for more on Foucault's "aesthetics of existence."

[2] See Jurgen Habermas' "Taking Aim at the Heart of the Present" in *Foucault: A Critical Reader,* ed. David Couzens Hoy (New York: Blackwell, 1986). Charles Taylor has launched a series of scathing attacks on Foucault's notion of an aesthetics of existence." The first of these and most notable is Foucault on Freedom and Truth in Foucault a Critical Reader Ed. David Couzens Hoy (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986) 69-103. Taylor has continued to criticize Foucault in *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, (Cambridge University Press, 1989 as well as his *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991. Nancy Fraser in her collection of essays *Unruly Practices* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989) presents many articulate and penetrating criticisms of Foucault's position on ethics, power and truth. Christopher Norris has again also argued along similar lines both in his earlier essay "What is Enlightenment? Kant according to Foucault" in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault* (Cambridge University Press, 1994) 159-197 as well as his more recent article: "Ethics, Autonomy and Self-Invention: A Reply to Patrick Shaw" in *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* Vol. 31 No.1 Jan. 2000, 92-103.

[3] The charge of dandyism, to my knowledge, is first *explicitly* suggested by Peter Dews in "The Return of the Subject in Late Foucault" in *Radical Philosophy,* Vol. 51 Spring 1989, 37-41. However, this specific criticism is not fully developed and articulated until Pierre Hadot's "Reflections on the Notion of the 'cultivation of the Self" in *Michel Foucault*: *Philosopher,* ed. Timothy Armstrong (New York: Routledge, 1991). Hadot writes: "By concentrating his interpretation to such a great extent exclusively on the interpretation of the cultivation of the self, on the concern for the self and on conversion towards the self and in a general way, by defining his ethical model as an ethics of existence, Foucault might have been advancing a cultivation of the self which was too purely aesthetic—that is to say, I fear, a new form of dandyism, a late twentieth century version" 230.

[4] Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject Lectures at the College de France 1981-1982* ed. Fredric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 379.

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