SELF-CREATED OR OTHER-INVOKED?

FOUCAULT AND LEVINAS ON HOW

TO BECOME ETHICAL

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Abstract

Foucault professes the possibility of resistance despite the human innate entrapment in power and knowledge. The ethical subject is the site where this resistance becomes possible, if and only this ethical subject is realised as something other than common speculative self-possession. Levinas does not equip the existent with any scope for ethical action. He constructs an existent that is happy, independent and atheistic, but completely powerless. Social reality seems to affirm Levinas' suspicions therein that many of us are primarily concerned with our own needs, desires and ambitions. Foucault does not offer an unproblematic alternative but he does believe in the subject's inherent ethical potential and in the possibility of actualising it.

The status of subject, in all of its multifarious manifestations, always bore the inherent ambivalence of designating man simultaneously as *subjectum* and *subjectus*. Following the death of God, man was hailed as transcendental Subject, and then, following his own demise, "Man" was decentred, recognised as historical construct and restored to its concrete finite existence in the world. For Foucault, the subject's restoration to the world and to history, the realisation that man is not given, left us with only one option, that is, to create the subject ourselves. For Levinas, on the other hand, the subject is incapable of self-creation and only fit to be invoked by the Other. For both the late Foucault and Levinas the question turns on *ethical* subjectivity in which the self's status as malleable *subjectum* and/or responsive and responsible *subjectus* is at stake. This essay will consider the questionable status of Foucault's late ethical subject. The deployment of subjectivity in the earliest work of

Levinas will be used as critical yardstick in an attempt at a defence of self-creation as ethical supplement, if not alternative to an invocation by a transcendent Other.

1. The argument

The aim of this paper is simple: it wants to resolve a false contradiction which arises whenever the question of ethical subjectivity is broached. I was led to confront this false contradiction in my efforts to defend the ethical status of Michel Foucault's notion of "self-creation". If the self cannot make itself ethical, then something "outside" or "beyond" the self must be able to make it so. This is the position defended by Emmanuel Levinas – that the ethical subject is and can only be invoked by the Other. In what follows, I shall critically consider these two seemingly contrary conditions of possibility of becoming ethical. For Foucault, this condition of possibility consists in "care of the self", and for Levinas, it consists in being addressed by the Other. I shall argue in favour of "care of the self" as ethical practice, not because it proves ethics to be an autonomous process, but precisely because it too turns on an essential openness towards alterity. A closer look at Levinas's relational conception of ethics shows the self and self-concern to be an equally crucial condition in turn.

In the late Foucault's conception of ethical subjectivity, in which the subject creates itself through care, the one who determines and the one who is determined by it, coincide. Matter, the determining rationality that forms it, and the form it takes on intersect in the subject.[1] Or, put differently, the subject and the object (or the artist and the artwork) cohere in the self-creating subject. This subject is mainly concerned with what to do, or how to act, that is, its concern is ethical. Following the liquidation of the concept of the transcendental subject – we all vividly recall Foucault's grand and prophetic gesture when he spoke of the erasure of man like a figure drawn in sand at the edge of the sea (1970: 387) – "Man" was decentred, recognised as historical construct and being human was restored to its finite existence in the

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[1] Foucault (1984: 10) insists that the subject "is not a substance; it is a form and this form is not above all or always identical to itself". The subject takes on different forms depending on whether he acts as a political subject or as a desiring subject, for example. We must thus understand Foucault's subject not as an essential unchanging substance, but as a malleable form. His notion of "self-creation" nevertheless implies that some part of the subject works on some other part of the subject to reshape it.

world. For Foucault, the subject's restoration to the world and to history, the realisation that man is not given, left us with only one option, that is, to create the subject ourselves (1983a: 351). And so the subject is constituted as *individual agency* characterised by autarky and auto-affection. It is set in opposition to the material, historical, economic, discursive and linguistic structures, practices and drives that constitute subjectivity and of which the subject is an effect.[2] In short, it is opposed to the subject as *subject*.

Subjectum and/or subjectus

Foucault's peculiar (re)turn to the self should thus be understood in light of a fundamental ambiguity inherent to the philosophical category of the "subject" in Western thought. Étienne Balibar (1994: 8) points to an objective "play on words" rooted in the very history of language and institutions. He is referring to the fact that we translate as "subject" *not only* the neutral, impersonal notion of *subjectum*, i.e. an individual substance or a material substratum for properties, but we *also* translate as "subject" the personal notion of a *subjectus*: a political and juridical term, which refers to *subjection* or *submission,* i.e. the fact that an individual person is *subjected to* the more or less absolute, more or less legitimate authority of a superior power, e.g. a "sovereign". This sovereign may be another human or supra-human, or an "inner" sovereign or master, or even simply a transcendent law. Balibar wants to focus our attention on the following dilemma: "why is it that the very *name* which allows modern philosophy to think and designate the *originary freedom* of the human being – the name of 'subject'[3] – is precisely the name which *historically* meant suppression of freedom, or at least an

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[2] These brief introductory remarks should not cause the reader to misunderstand Foucault. He is not proposing that the subject can ever entirely be "outside" of power, but rather that this fact "*does not* entail the necessity of accepting an inescapable form of domination (Gordon (Ed.) 1980: 141, my emphasis). The struggle against the submission of subjectivity (Foucault 1982a: 212) is precisely possible because it takes place in the same place as power. If we understand the exercise of power as a mode of action upon the action of others, the freedom to act and to react is implicit to power. That is why resistance to power can only occur amidst relations of power (*Ibid*, p. 221; Gordon (Ed.) 1980: 142). In other words, being situated amidst the forces that constitute subjectivity does not mean that we cannot counter them through self-creation – unless these forces amount to a physical determination.

[3] Here Balibar (1994: 9) refers to the fact that the main characteristic of "morality" in Kant's philosophy is that it provides the subject with its own essential "autonomy".

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intrinsic limitation of freedom, i.e. *subjection*?" Framed in different terms: if freedom means freedom *of the subject/s*, is it because there is, in "subjectivity", an originary source of spontaneity and autonomy, something irreducible to objective constraints and determinations? Or is it rather because "freedom" can only be the result and counterpart of liberation, emancipation, *becoming* free: a relational trajectory, which starts with subjection but also implies a struggle against it?[4]

Ancient man was first and foremost *subjectum*, i.e. an individual substance or a material substratum for properties. To be sure, he also had a relation to subjection, dependency and obedience, but the man-citizen of the Greek *polis*, his autonomy and reciprocity, his relations of equality, are incompatible with the external subjection typical of women or slaves, for example. Even the young boy who offered himself as the obliging object of another's pleasure, who temporarily assumed the "inferior" position of passive partner, was still considered "more superior" (Foucault 1992: 215-6). And when Socrates taught Alcibiades in Plato's *Alcibiades I* that he had to take care of the self, that is, the *soul,* it was in order "to gain personal power over all others both inside and outside the city" (Foucault 1982b: 23, 25).

The decline of the ancient world was accompanied by the emergence of another figure exemplified by Christian man. The subject's subjection was now interpreted as (willing) *obedience,* coming from inside, coming from the soul. This *subjectus* or *subditus,* is subjected *to* the sovereign, the lord, ultimately the Lord God. In this respect obedience does not designate an inferior degree of humanity, but on the contrary a superior destination, the guarantee of future salvation. The figure of the *inner* subject emerges, who confronts or is confronted rather by a transcendental law, both theological and political, religious (therefore also moral) or imperial (monarchical) – because he *hears* it, because in order to be able to hear it, he has to be called by it. The subject is basically a *responsible*, or an *accountable* subject, which means that he has to respond and give an account of his actions and intentions, before

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[4] For Foucault, practices of liberty are inextricably linked to liberation. This only becomes clear when one understands his distinction between power and domination. States of domination occur when relations of power become firmly set and congealed instead of allowing free and variable actions upon the actions of others. In such cases of domination in which the reversibility of movement has been blocked, liberation becomes the condition for any practice of liberty. Foucault maintains that "[l]iberation opens up new relationships of power, which have to be controlled by practices of liberty" (1984: 3-4).

another person, who righteously interpellates him, such as a Transcendent Other, for example. The subject is subjected and this subjection is the very condition of any reciprocity (Balibar 1994: 9).

2. Foucault: The self-creation of the ethical subject

What interested Foucault was certain forms of *subjectivation* inasmuch as they correspond to certain forms of *subjection,* and beyond that, "the struggle against forms of subjection – against the submission of subjectivity" (Foucault 1982a: 213). This led him from knowledge to power and finally to the self. In fact, he maintains that the general theme of his research has always been the subject (209). Recognising that the subject is a historical construct, he exchanged the "what is" question of ontology for historiographical research with which to excavate the cultural practices that have made us what we are. Archaeology refers to the method of analysis of the general characteristics of discursive practices. Foucault then shifted his focus from these institutionalised discursive practices to power relations – from the analysis of the internal ordering of existing knowledge structures of the human sciences to the external workings of power relations. The archaeology of knowledge investigated the ways in which man was constituted on a theoretical level from "within" by the human sciences, whereas the genealogy of power was aimed at how man is practically moulded and remoulded from "without" by power relations. Man appeared as both the object and the subject of contingent normalising discourses resulting from power/knowledge constellations.

For Foucault, knowledge and truth do not set us free as is often assumed, but are accessory to normalising power which categorises i ndividuals and marks t hem by their own individuality. Moreover, by internalising these imposed identities we participate in our o wn s ubjection – we c onstitute ourselves a s *subjects.* O n t he one hand, Foucault insists that "[w]e must promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries" (1982a: 216). On the other hand and at the same time, he is aware that the very project of self-constitution is itself not exempt from the insidious workings of that form of power which make individuals subjects. Here Foucault explicitly refers to the 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 (212). Not that everything is bad, says Foucault, "but … everything is

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dangerous". And if everything is dangerous, no alternative or possible solution is going to lead to a final liberation, but will simply be recovered by the prevailing order. Foucault does not hope to liberate us once and for all from all domination and danger, but to make us conscious of the ignorance cultivated and enforced by our most noble disciplines, institutions, professions and forms of knowledge. To this end Foucault attempts the "genealogy of problems, of *problématiques*". He maintains that if everything is dangerous, we always have something to do. Therefore he insists that his position does not lead to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism (Foucault 1983a: 343).

What we have to *do* is to "refuse what we are" (Foucault 1982a: 216) or at least those parts of our identities that undermine our autonomy – that is, *if* we can distinguish them. The problem is that the very power structures that individualise us are also responsible for our subjection. That is why Foucault does not propose half measures but a thoroughgoing pessimistic activism which entails a two-pronged ethical sensibility: (1) to resist imposed subjugation on the one hand, we have to *create* ourselves anew through care; and (2) to resist internalised and thus *self*-imposed subjugation as well as the colonisation of newly created subject identities on the other hand, we have to *overcome* ourselves. Proper care of the self, understood as an effort to affirm one's liberty (Lotringer 1996: 451), thus consists in violation of the self – I have to reject that which is imposed, but also that which I create anew for no alternative is free from those power structures that will eventually enslave us. Some people admittedly lead flourishing lives in "bondage".[5] For them freedom entails a hellish responsibility which has nothing to do with "proper" care of the self. Foucault has to be extremely radical to awaken us to the danger inherent to things that are not necessarily experienced as bad. At bottom he probably considers complacency to be the biggest danger to our liberty.

Foucault had already addressed the issue of the self in the first volume of *The history of sexuality*, *La Valonté de savoir* (1976), but there he was still concerned with the objectification of the self by the

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[5] Humour me if you will and think for example of Andy and Larry Wachowski's *The Matrix*, a movie that has, I admit, been overexploited by pseudo-intellectuals. It nevertheless provides us with a particularly vivid example of how people can lead flourishing lives while unfree, that is, while being "plugged into" the codified virtual universe that simulates our everyday reality. It furthermore illustrates how liberation can inaugurate a difficult and precarious e xistence, and t hat some i ndividuals even prefer the s imulation to freedom.

"increasing valorization of the discourse on sex" (1990a: 23, 70). What is of immediate interest in this volume is his critique of a certain conception of power which he terms "juridico-discursive": "Confronted by a power that is (prohibitive) law, the subject who is constituted as subject – who is "subjected" – is s/he who obeys (85). Here he warns against a form of subjectivation which takes the form of subjection when the individual submits to a prohibitive law.

In the second and third volumes of *The history of sexuality,* Foucault attempts, in the context of ancient Greek and Greco-Roman culture, to illustrate how one's relationship to oneself can be lived. In Antiquity, the hermeneutics of the self was constituted by the precept to take care of the self, a practice subtended by an *aesthetics of existence.* For the Greeks, this precept had precedence over the Delphic principle, *gnothi sauton* ("know yourself"), or put differently, it constituted the condition for the possibility of knowledge of the self. In modern times, and certainly in our philosophical tradition, the hierarchy of the two principles had been inverted: knowledge of the self now constitutes the most important moral principle, whereas the notion of care of the self has become rather suspect. According to Foucault, there are various reasons for this inversion: amongst them is the fact that we have come to respect external law instead of respect for the self as the basis for morality, and to seek the rules for acceptable behaviour in relations with others (Foucault 1982b: 22).

Care of the self is a *transgressive* experience insofar as the self, as work of art, is no longer the passive product or construct of an external system of constraint and prescriptions, but the *active agent* of its own formation. Foucault understands transgression as a "limit-attitude", that is, a practical critique that takes shape as the constant possibility of transgressing one's limits (1983b: 45). It is process through which constant pressure is exerted on our limits, not to transcend them, for we need our limits as that which defines us. We apply pressure upon specific limits to expose the weaknesses where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the specific form of change (47). "We have to move beyond the outside-inside alternative; we have to be at the frontiers" (45). Only in this way can I deconstruct my subjugated identity and re-constitute my subject identity differently.

Accordingly, in his late work Foucault no longer conceives of subjectivity as a product of power, but as the result of techniques of *subjecitivisation* which may indeed have connections with techniques of power but are essentially distinct from them. In short, he shifts emphasis from the problematic of subjectivising subjection

(*assujetissement*) to that of subjectivisation (*subjectivation*) (Visker 1995: 88). T his entails the promotion of new forms of subjectivity subtended by an ethical sensibility which is not based on a corpus of prescriptive rules of conduct or on a normative framework that would be universal, abstract, formal and rationally grounded, but on an "aesthetics of existence"...

> those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set t hemselves r ules of conduct, b ut also s eek t o transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their lives into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria (Foucault 1992: 11-12).

In his/her effort to become ethical, the Foucaultian subject engages in certain technologies of the self, practical tests, self-examinations and disciplined exercises with the common goal of conversion to the self (Foucault: 1990b: 58-65). As self-converted, the self is finally freed from all dependencies and enslavements, master of him/herself and able to delight in him/herself (65). It is a matter of personal choice during which one's existence, one's *bios,* is shaped as an aesthetic piece of art without any reference to any authoritarian system (1983a: 348). Care of the self thus prepares the subject to become an *ethical* subject, that is, to take up his/her ethical responsibility towards others. If I care correctly for myself, I will, per definition, be obligated to care correctly for others.[6] Being master of my excessive and violent impulses, my conduct towards others is regulated and because I am completely independent, my interaction with others is never exploitative. Because care of the self trains the individual to *become* ethical, it is already ethical in itself. However, according to Foucault, the Greeks would not have the care for others precede the care for self. For them, care for self took moral precedence in the measure that the relationship to self took ontological precedence" (Foucault 1984: 7).

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[6] Foucault explains that for the Greeks, care for self implied complex relations with others, "in the measure where this *ethos* of freedom is also a way of caring for others... *Ethos* implies also a relation with others to the extent that care for self renders one competent to occupy a place in the city, in the community or in inter-individual relationships". It also involves others in the measure that they aid care of the self in their capacity as masters, friends, guides or councillors. Foucault stresses that the problem of relationship with others is present all along the development of care of the self (Foucault 1984: 7).

The case against self-creation as ethical practice

However, Foucault's critics were not convinced. How can one become ethical by being self-indulgent, through an essentially narcissistic practice? Their main concern was that what Foucault described as ethical was nothing more than a form of egotistical preoccupation with the self or self-exaltation which is precisely the condition that forms the crux of contemporary society's ethical quandary. According to Richard Wolin, for example, Foucault's studies concerning the care of the self promote forms of "narcissistic self-absorption" and "outwardly aggressive self-aggrandizement" (Wolin 1987: 85).[7] Why would the independent self-converted subject, who needs nothing and no one, take up his/her ethical responsibility towards others? What is particularly ethical about creating oneself anew in order not to be subjected? It certainly does give new impetus to "the undefined work of freedom" (Foucault 1983b: 46), but is it also ethical?

Moreover, the very project of self-constitution threatens to be nothing other than self-subjugation: we constitute ourselves by internalising normative codes of conduct and normalising knowledge about the self generated by institutions, experts, the media, etc. In short, we become subjected because of the ways in which we govern ourselves. Foucault contends that "the idea of a morality as obedience to a code of rules is now disappearing, has already disappeared", and that we should respond to this "absence of morality" with a search for a personal ethics, an aesthetics of existence (Lotringer 1996: 451). Notwithstanding the few isolated cases of resurgence of fundamentalist religion, one might agree that such rigid notions of morality are increasingly coming under fire. However, the question is whether an aesthetics of existence does not fall prey to the same pitfalls? Even a creative process of *autonomous* self-stylisation is to some extent informed by certain rules of conduct and certain values from our surroundings and culture, which we internalise. This process is in fact permeated by rules, descriptions and prescriptions that put into practice certain formulas and beliefs regarding the self. Even if we are entirely free to choose and impose our own moral principles, we always unwittingly also choose built-in notions of how we ought to be, determined by normalising power/knowledge structures. The liberty of individuals to develop all manners of codes and knowledge and give them

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[7] See also Eagleton: 1990: 372; Norris 1992: 163 and Callinicos 1989: 91.

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governing power by accounts of prescriptive origins and foundations – that liberty is underwritten only by the limits and transgressions of knowledge, not by the substance of knowledge. The formation of the self as a self-representing subject is in question by virtue of its liberty not only because of the content of its knowledge but also because of its *form*. As such, self-representation as self-mastery contributes towards our unfreedom even as it attempts to do the opposite. We are then compelled to overcome every alternative self-representation as well. The pursuit of liberation thus inversely "undermines" the self's ethical project. In fact, Foucault cannot propose another form of self-representation or self-constitution without returning to the formation that his work puts in question (Scott 1990: 90). To offer alternative guidelines for self-constitution simply replaces one form of subjection with another. It is the second component of auto-*nomy,* the moment of legislation, that characterises the subjectivity of the subject – and also attenuates its project of liberation.

At this critical juncture, the work of Emmanuel Levinas, widely considered to be an ethical thinker par excellence, might help us to understand the ethical import of self-concern if indeed it exists. His earliest three works[8] are primarily concerned with the transcendence or self-transcendence of the self and he presents it as a *defence of subjectivity* (Levinas 1979: 26). In terms of the presentation of the question of self-transcendence in Levinas's work it certainly precedes and (in the three early works cited above) is never eclipsed by the question of ethics. The problem of the subject's escape (*évasion*) from itself[9] is resolved in the course of these works in terms of ethics or the encounter with the Other. Levinas then maintains that the subject only comes into being as *ethical* subject. For him, ethics precedes ontology, that is, I only truly come into being, my existence only becomes truly meaningful when confronted by the Other. Only after the Other has made me into a better person,

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[8] Levinas's earliest three works are *De l'existence a l'existant* (1947); *Le temps et l' autre* (1948) and *Totalité et infini* (1961). I made use of the following English translations: *Existence and existents* (1978), trans. by Alphonso Lingis; *Time and the Other* (1987), trans. by R. Cohen; and *Totality and infinity* (1979), trans. by Alphonso Lingis.

[9] Even though Levinas seemed to want to forget his earliest work, an essay entitled, "De l'évasion" (1935), it is concerned with this theme exactly: the escape (évasion) of the subject from itself. In this essay, Levinas does not yet see any solution (the question of ethics has not yet arisen) and it ends with the idea of the inevitability of the failure of the attempt to escape. An English translation of this essay has recently appeared entitled, *On escape,* translated by Bettina Bergo, Stanford University Press, 2003.

do I exist in any meaningful sense of the term. In short, to be, for Levinas, is to be *better* than being. But what is the status of being *before* being made better by the Other, that is, the status of what Levinas calls, the *existent*?

Levinas's earliest three works consist in phenomenological analyses of the existent's coming into being and living in the world. Here the existent's formation as separated, self-sufficient and autonomous subject takes place. He describes this phase as essentially economic and "atheist"[10] – thus pre- or non-ethical – but which serves as an essential preparatory stage in the deployment of ethical subjectivity. It is here that we shall find certain structural elements that function analogously to Foucault's self-concerned subject and which will serve to elucidate to what extent Foucault's ethics really is questionable. Their respective notions can be said to be functionally analogous, not because Levinas's existent is ethical, but precisely because it too is egocentric, but this egocentrism proves to be a crucial condition – necessary although not sufficient – for the possibility of *becoming ethical.*

3. Levinas: The existent vs. ethical subject as Other-invoked

In Levinas's ethical metaphysics it is the absolute Other that confronts the atheist existent and breaks through the crust of egoism and interrupts its gravitational pull. For Levinas, the existent cannot save itself by itself, salvation comes from elsewhere, from beyond. However, before Levinas introduces the Other he directs our attention to a "level of life" ontologically prior to that on which the ethical encounter with the other person occurs. He describes what may be termed the "developmental" stages of the existent alone in the world. Like Foucault's late ethical subject, the Levinasian existent, in its incipient deployment, is also engaged in certain practices that will enable it to become independent and self-converted through the necessary care of the self. This essentially *economic* existence takes the form of a *living of/from* provisional exteriority in the world to constitute an interiority. These practices

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[10] The existent is *atheist* therein that "it lives outside of God, at home with itself; one is an I, an egoism" (Levinas 1979: 58). It is not immersed in a surpassing whole, as conceived in the primitive religions of magic and mythology. An independent and completely secularised I has gotten rid of all gods and sacred powers; it is atheistic because it is free. Levinas elaborates: "By atheism we thus understand a position prior to both the negation and the affirmation of the divine, the breaking with participation by which the I posits itself as the same and as I" (*Ibid.*).

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enable them to cultivate a certain independence which frees them from any fear of future insecurity and allows them to delight in themselves – to enjoy life.

In his earliest study, *De l'existence a l'existant,* Levinas's primary emphasis falls on a phenomenological description of the *il y a*, which is e xistence (being) *without* existents (beings), a n eutral, impersonal region from which subjectivity is not yet differentiated. Hypostasis announces the existent's inception into being, its separation from anonymity followed by its resultant coming into the world: first, as a kind of system-unto-itself weighted down by an unbearable materiality, and then as being-in-the-world economically – primarily caring for itself. Economic existence is characterised by needs, the fulfilment of which leads to a "life of enjoyment". The existent is shown to be dependent upon the basic commodities of living (Levinas calls them elements), but also capable of mastering them. However, the egoism of enjoyment is soon vitiated by insecurity i n r espect o f t he a vailability o f t he e lements the subject depends on. This instability is arrested through the setting up of a dwelling. The home and domesticity make labour and representation possible and thus reduce insecurity through the deferred pleasure of possessions. I labour and produce, and through these products and *possessions I secure* myself against the insecurity of the future. Although the dwelling (economic) stage marks a step forward therein that enjoyment is now secured, it is enjoyment in solitude.[11]

Levinas sketches an inherent negativity at the heart of our existential condition – being mired in a materiality always on the brink of self-implosion and always menaced by future insecurity. The existent constantly tries to get free of itself, but its worldly existence only ever offers it a partial and temporary alleviation from its existential burden.[12] In his subsequent two works, *Le temps et l'*

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[11] The critical reader might object to Levinas's characterisation of man as primordially alone, objecting that humans are rather essentially *social* creatures. Levinas is not denying that the individual is surrounded by people in the world. These encounters with others in the world are part of my economic existence in which they serve to satisfy my n eeds. Being a "social c reature" in t his s ense does not undo egoism. True sociality only comes into being when I encounter that O ther which i mposes a n i nfinite r esponsibility and m akes me aware a nd ashamed of my egotistical ways.

[12] To understand this we have to understand Levinas's distinction between need and desire. Our economic existence in the world is characterised by needs. To satisfy t hese n eeds we r each towards things i n t he w orld. This creates some distance between the self and its materiality, which s/he experiences as unbearably heavy. However, as soon as our needs are satisfied we collapse back upon ourselves. Desire, on the other hand, can never be

autre (1948) and *Totalité et infini* (1961), the same themes recur, but as the Other makes a more prominent appearance, self-involvement finally completely dissolves in the face of the transcendent Other. It is here through the idea of Desire, interpreted as Desire for the Other as *other*, that the ethical relation – which Levinas also describes as a face-to-face relation – has its starting point. It is here where the existent and its immanent preoccupations are made meaningful by the transcendent Other, where the egoist existent becomes an ethical subject by virtue of a judgement that arrests its egotistical orientation, pardons it and turns it to goodness, that is, towards its infinite responsibility. Paradoxically it is also this infinite responsibility that alleviates its material existential burden.

The egoist existent encounters the Other as a prohibitive law, a law that says "no" to egoism and murder: "thou shalt not kill" (Levinas 1979: 198). The subject who is constituted as subject – who is "subjected" – is s/he who obeys. Subjectivisation takes the form of subjection. In Levinas's scheme of things it is thus precisely by virtue of a law of prohibition – what Foucault has described as a "juridico-discursive" conception of power – that ethical subjectivity is instituted. However, herein Levinas goes beyond Foucault, because the Other is the transcendent Other, "the Most-High" (34). For the purposes of the argument pursued here, I shall therefore limit myself to Levinas's preceding analyses which he characterises essentially as *economic*.

Levinas describes subjectivity as purely economic entity as follows: "Separation is accomplished positively as the interiority of a being referring to itself and maintaining itself of itself – all the way to atheism! ...It is an essential sufficiency, which in its expansion...is even in possession of its own origin" (1979: 299). Levinas depicts interiority as a separation so radical one in no way derives one's being from contact with the other. It is to draw one's existence from oneself, and from nothing else. This being remains free to either do the right or the wrong thing. It can choose. Left to its own devices the separated I will remain so, that is, naturally inclined to retain its independence and egocentric pleasures. It does not voluntarily turn towards the Other, but remains entirely deaf to the Other. In enjoyment, the I is entirely for itself – "*without ears, like a hungry stomach*" (134, my emphasis). It is precisely the Other, and *only* the

satisfied which means that the movement away from ourselves towards that which we desire, remains in the beyond. This Desire is only invoked by the Other. In other words, it is only Desire for the Other as *other*, as something we cannot assimilate to satisfy our needs, that will enable the existent to escape its existential burden.

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Other, absolutely other, that initiates the conversion or reorientation *despite* the I. The contented closed system of egocentrism is confronted by something it cannot resist, despite its self-sufficiency. Thus a transcendent Other is needed for the self's salvation. Goodness does not come from within, Levinas insists.

One is immediately struck by the rigid oppositional structure of Levinas's scheme. On the one hand, we have the economic existence which is completely atheist and strictly unethical, and which leaves the existent with no recourse to ethical behaviour. On the other hand, we have the ethical existence initiated and sustained by a transcendent Other, so radically other as to be impossible to objectify or conceptualise in any way. This Other subjects the egoist existent to a law that says "no" to egoism and murder, but it is also through this Other that the existent's existence becomes meaningful – that the ethical subject is invoked. Egoism is thus refuted, but subjectivity is rehabilitated (Levinas 1979: 300).

This oppositional structure compels us to ask the same question as we did to Foucault: Why would the existent as a system-unto-itself, as completely self-sufficient, lacking nothing that it cannot satisfy by its existential praxis of nourishment in the world respond to the call of the Other? As a "hungry stomach" without ears, why and how would it be responsive to a call that subjects it and demands that it gives up its happy independence? For Levinas, it is precisely because we are nothing but needy beings, content in our being needy, abstracted to the point of being "hungry stomachs" without ears that an intervention by a radical Other is necessitated. This intervention happens *despite* the existent being a contented closed system of egoism and as something it cannot resist (Levinas 1979: 62). He insists that the existent is able to respond precisely because of its separation and independence[13] in the first instance, but also because it is predisposed towards the Other, because it always already has the *idea of Infinity*. This is something which the Other "puts into" or bestows upon the self to make the self receptive to the ethical address. And precisely because it always already has the idea of Infinity, Levinas retrospectively declares the monopolistic economy of interiority an *abstraction*, albeit a necessary moment of

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13 According to Levinas, the position of the I consists precisely in "being able to respond to this essential destitution of the Other, finding resources for myself" (1979: 215). The only way for the self to be able to respond, is to be an I, that is, separated, independent, self-sufficient – finding resources for itself, that is, *taking care of itself*.

human existence.[14] Here Levinas argues that "economic life" is not a realistic portrayal of the existent's existence, because the existent is always already predisposed towards the Other.

The question is whether Levinas's description of the existent's economic existence in the world is an accurate description or whether it is an *abstraction* for an entirely different reason? For if we were something more than "earless hungry stomachs", if we were furnished with the slightest potential for ethicality, we would be able to actively participate in the ethical gesture of approaching the other person instead of passively awaiting intervention by a transcendent Other. We would no longer be condemned to the passive participation in a hopeless amorality.

4. The ethical scope of self-creation

Let us consider the late Foucault's and the early Levinas's respective notions of subjectivity. Foucault's ethics centres on the self and Levinas's ethics centres on the Other, which makes for an active and radically passive ethical subject respectively. Foucault resists subjectivisation through subjection, Levinas insists upon it. Foucault proposes auto-affection as alternative to the submission of subjectivity and as the continuous project of *becoming free*. Levinas maintains that only as *subjectus*, that is, as subjected to the Other do I attain true freedom, which Levinas understands as freedom from the constraints of egoism.

The place of the economic in Levinas's scheme has shown that although not sufficient, it serves as *necessary* condition for the existent's ethical conversion. Why, because for Levinas, the self has to be completely atheist and independent before it can become ethical.[15] The identity of the Self and the alterity of the Other must

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[14] Levinas distinguishes between the egotistical existent as *ileity* and the "creature" (the ethical subject) as two different structural moments. However, he does not separate them in the latter part of *Totalité et Infini* [TI]. Once the existent has been converted into an ethical subjectivity, the movements of interiority and towards exteriority become simultaneous. "Inner life" or "interiority" as monopolistic economy is described as an *abstraction* albeit a necessary moment of human existence, since it constitutes the egoity needed for "the interval of separation" (1979: 110) and the primordial relation. "The enjoyment of egology", Levinas maintains, does "not render the concrete man, for in reality, man already has the idea of infinity" (139). The abstractness of Section II is explicitly stated at the end of TI (305). However, in what follows I shall describe the economic as abstract for an entirely different reason.

[15] According to Levinas (1979: 148), as necessary condition of the idea of infinity, the closedness of the separated being must be a *real* as opposed to a

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both remain intact for ethics is realised as a *relation*. In this sense, one could argue that the Foucaultian aesthetics of existence functions analogously to the existent's economic existence since both serve as necessary preparatory stage for the ethical life. And this in turn shows self-concern to be something other than mere narcissism, because it has ethics as motive. But left there, as self-enclosed independent system-unto-itself, the subject *will* remain unethical. And it is here that Foucault's aesthetics of existence seems to fall short as an ethical practice: Why would it take up its ethical responsibility towards others – especially if Foucault denies it recourse to anything such as a law because it might *subject* it in the process of ethical subjectivisation? At the same time, Foucault's belief in the possibility of a loosening of the connections between the three axes of subjectification: power, truth and ethics,[16] seems to be overly optimistic. The auto-*nomy* that characterises the subjectivity of the auto-affected subject is precisely self-legislation.

Foucault proposes an almost inconceivable conflation of artist and artwork, of making the self an object of itself such that it is the subject of its own mastery. The self is both the determining power of an agency *and* that which is determined by it. Moreover, if we understand agency as the human capacity for planning, willing and acting, what prevents the subject from subordinating the other to that very determining power instead of merely its own life. What prevents this system-unto-itself from becoming a local force of domination over others?

Foucault's aesthetics of existence do not stop at self-constitution however. We should care for ourselves, Foucault insists, in order to "get free of ourselves", to "stray afield of ourselves" (1992: 8; 1983b: 46). Thus we first care for ourselves to become self-mastered, but self-mastery entails self-legislation which bears the risk of diminishing the freedom of the individual instead of safeguarding it. No alternative subject identity is exempt from this pitfall and that is why proper care of the self also demands *transgression* of the self, that is, we have to then *transgress* – infringe, go beyond, violate – ourselves! This is certainly something other than mere narcissism but what is the ethical purport of transgression and does it cultivate a responsiveness to the other?

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merely apparent interiority. For this, the destiny of the interior being must be pursued in an egoist atheism refuted by nothing exterior.

[16] Foucault believed in the possibility of an ethical relation to the self which has recourse neither to knowledge nor to universal rules. *Cf.* Foucault 1983a: 349-50, Deleuze 1988: 100 and Simons: 1995: 72.

Earlier I have mentioned that Foucault's ethical project is to go beyond the limits to which humans are subjected (Foucault 1983b: 47), taking "the form of a possible transgression" (45).[17] In other words, he proposes a "critical ontology" (1983b: 47), that is, an analysis of the limits of our being, not in the sense of an essential, unchanging being but contingent, plural and transformable ways of being human subjects. Critical ontology is conducted as genealogical analysis of the limits of subjectivity which are to be transgressed (1983b: 45-6).

The spheres of transgression, Foucault warns, have been absorbed by anthropological (or humanist) discourses which confine transgression to unilluminating reversals of prohibitions (1963: 30, 50). Foucault refers to something completely different when he speaks of transgression. Instead of offering us a limitless freedom in reaction to a prohibitive law that constitutes through subjection (1990: 85), transgression is an action which involves the limit (1963: 33). Transgression only has meaning in relation to the limit, and as such, it cannot be a *transcendence* of all limits or their erasure. In relation to its transgression, the limit becomes something other than merely constraining or life-stultifying: limits are affirmed as that which outline our very being, as being *enabling*. On the one hand, "transgression contains nothing negative, but affirms limited being – affirms the limitlessness into which it leaps as it opens this zone to existence for the first time" (35). In this movement, the limit "find(s) itself in what it excludes" (34). On the other hand, "this affirmation contains nothing positive, that is, no content can bind it" (36). It thus opens our existence to what lies beyond the limits of the self, and in this sense it is a "movement of pure violence" (35) directed at that which imprisons it. At the same time, it does not affirm that which was once outside as being part of the self now, that is, it does not reduce alterity by simply assimilating it. In the move beyond its own limits, and precisely because of the *constant* movement beyond, the self cannot be bound by any content or confined to an unchanging identity. Being fluid and ever transformable, the self is constantly

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[17] Foucault (1963) first approaches the theme of transgression in relation to art. When he returns to the concept two decades later in his central essay, "What is Enlightenment?" (1983b), he refers to the same issues of the transgression of limits and critical ontology. [18] The self does not violate the other because it had to become master of itself before being able to transgress its limits. As self-mastered, it does not need the other and because it does not need the other it will not exploit the other.

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projected towards alterity in a movement that violates the self without violating the other in turn.[18] This relationship between transgression and the limit takes the form of a "spiral which no simple infraction can exhaust" (35). It is transgression of transgression without end, for subjectivity cannot accede to ethicality through its own internal development, but only by the radical discovery of what is *other than itself.*

Transgression thus accomplishes two things at once: in the first instance, it facilitates ethical conduct towards others, because the self-converted self is drawn out of itself and confronted with what is other-than-itself without assimilating alterity in the process. Transgression succeeds i n o pening the s elf t o t he o ther *a s o ther,* because it counters the violence of the limits of the self. This violence consists in the exclusion or marginalisation of alterity which occurs when we approach the other with an unwavering identity that cannot but be violating. The ethical impulse underlying transgression is precisely the expansion of the limits of the self – to make room for the other! In t he s econd instance, t ransgression also s erves a s a site of resistance. Because it is a continuous process, it counters the risk of self-subjugation and of alternative subject identities becoming institutionalised or normalised. In t his manner it prevents the fluid agonistic play of power relations from becoming solidified into a rigid structure of domination in which the powerless face the powerful and all possibilities of counteraction have vanished.

5. Conclusion

What becomes apparent now is that every criticism levelled against care of the self seems to neglect the necessity of recurrent transgression inherent to Foucault's ethics, that is, the necessity of constantly overcoming every alternative self-representation through non-positive affirmation. Transgression of imposed and self-created identities is certainly the trump card in Foucault's defence, but itself not unproblematic.

Transgression does seem to open up the ethical scope of care of the self, but it remains unclear how or by whom this self-violation is triggered. How can the moral initiative emanate from a closed system-unto-itself? If the self can create itself, does this mean that it can also negate itself? Moreover, a very thin line separates negation as an *enabling* practice from negation as a *self-destruction.* If it does not imply wholesale rejectionism, what does it mean to "affirm nothing positive"?

Foucault affirms the possibility of resistance *despite* our inherent entrapment in power/knowledge. The ethical subject is the site where this resistance becomes possible, if and only if this ethical subject is realised as something other than mere contemplative self-possession. The self has to be *dispossessed* from that part of its identity coupled to established codes of identity. This self is not a self-identical subject; it occurs, on the contrary as a "diastasis", a non-coinciding o f s elf w ith s elf. It a ccomplishes s elf-mastery precisely when it succeeds in *overmastering* itself, by going beyond itself to relocate the other within itself. The other is non-positively affirmed within the self, an affirmation that affirms nothing positive, simply "an affirmation of division" (Foucault 1963: 36). The other is affirmed as radical difference within the self and this is precisely what turns the self-converted self *outward* towards others. If we accept this to be the essence of Foucault's conception of self-creation as an ethical practice, we also have to concede that ethics is not and cannot be an autonomous process. And this is something that Levinas has known all along.

Despite its merits, transgression hardly offers us easy access to the other, and to ethicality by implication. It is a dangerous experience, which is not only difficult to conceive but inherently unstable. There are only acts and moments of transgression which Simons (1996: 70) describes as "a risky act of teetering on the edge of the abyss into which one might occasionally fall". Since it "opens" limited being and delivers it to the other, it risks inundating the identity of the self. The self finds itself caught in the precarious and uncertain space between the two poles of unbearable lightness and unbearable heaviness, of absolute unlimitedness and complete limitation (*Ibid.*).

Levinas o n the other hand, d oes not equip t he existent with any scope for ethical action. He constructs an existent that is happy, independent and atheist, but completely powerless. Our economic existence in the world is radicalised and abstracted to the point where we are nothing but deaf and hungry, and as such, we really are incapable of doing anything beyond the blind satisfaction of our needs. Here the self is nothing but an unwavering identity swallowing all (provisional) alterity in its path in the blind pursuit of its cravings. Social reality seems to affirm Levinas's suspicions therein that many of us are primarily concerned with our own needs, desires and ambitions, but does this mean that we cannot also *be better, better than* hungry stomachs without ears?

Foucault does not believe in or offer an unproblematic alternative but he does believe in the subject's inherent ethical

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potential and in the possibility of actualising it. This might inaugurate a precarious existence with no firm grounds or secure sites, but no one ever said the ethical life is an easy life...

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