

Aesthetic Ends of Biology in Foucault

'There is no reason for the writing of a book' (Foucault 453).

Discipline & Punish opens with an agonizing description of state-sponsored torture and murder. It would seem like an unnecessary obscenity to have to say that Foucault was 'opposed' to this tribulation, though of course he would of had to have been. But it is a serious question, whether the text advances this project forward, and in exactly what way. It has been said that, "Habermas registered ethical concerns about Foucault's putative affinities with the 'aesthetic modernism' of 'nihilistic dark writers of the bourgeoisie' like Nietzsche, which he equates with irrationalism, nihilism, and amorality" (Longford 573). It would seem that any philosophy which does not concern itself with the ethical explicitly should potentially fall into such a trap. Furthermore, "Foucault's recommendation of collective resistance has such a blind and undifferentiated character as to be almost politically irresponsible. He provides us, ultimately, with no way of distinguishing the resistance of the women's movement or the Polish Solidarity movement from, say, the Ku Klux Klan or Jim Jones's People's Temple" (White 430). It is widely disputed therefore whether he could sufficiently justify his political commitments.

However, I think we must see conversely that, "...his ethics of self-fashioning takes the form of a relationship to one's self that is ever cognizant of its fragility and contingency, and in which one seeks one's own self-overcoming" (Longford 577). That there is no guarantee here, or in its place even a great risk, is not just the erasure of all hope for a future or for a glimmer of the transcendental. "In relation to his work in general, such an ethics of the care of the self follows from an acknowledgement of the contingency of identities and subject positions revealed in his genealogical studies. By revealing the artifice, contingency, and web of relations lying behind every identity, including one's own, Foucault's genealogies weaken the sense of necessity and inevitability attached to what we are, think, and do, thereby opening up a space for experimentation with new identities and social relations." A radical politics should be in favor of the possibility of self-transformation over any definite, stable, necessary identity - say, by absolute, sovereign right. These set of quotations though define the two extreme polarities of readings in the literature regarding Foucault's aesthetics. We will find that critical measures he deploys against an administrative containment of life under the guise of its preservation are not to be confused with some merely destructive aesthetic.

In a recent article Malabou reads Foucault as performing a revolting attack on biology, and proceeds with the presentation of an admirable defense of the field. But must Foucault be read as being generally opposed to biology? For him, it is merely not the final aim or end of life as Malabou and the rest of the clinical formation at large demands. Should we be surprised that they must attempt to make this demand of us? She sees the part of his aims that need to be retained in the introduction of biopolitics as the final deconstruction of the sovereign

as power. Foucault describes in this way, "...the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary" (Foucault 139). These early medical institutions began to stand in for the sovereign's unconditional role of meting out death. Going on, "Their supervision was effected through an entire series of interventions and regulatory controls: a biopolitics of the population". Another new form of power brought about in modernity, biopower, which undertakes an implicit deconstruction of prior sovereignty, is intimately related to the emergence of the biological sciences. Power being pervasive then is not going anywhere, but the sovereign figure of power is actively being diminished and replaced by new technologies of discipline & control, as administration, and self-regulation. Sovereignty as a function of centralization most significantly here is disintegrating.

The sovereign would like to have its rule viewed as entirely natural, that it has already filled in all of the open spaces. For Malabou, the king possesses two separate bodies, which are its ordinary, natural biological body, and its symbolic body, its body-politic, made up by the investment of its subjects to its rule. Hobbes gives a decisive description of the formation of the king as sovereign in *The Leviathan*, as it precisely depicts the body of the king with its many heads attached directly to it acting in the role of subject. The king in this situation wields power limitlessly, constituting the power of the right to life and death over others. But its symbolic conception always serves to make forcibly apparent its visible limits. It then attempts to codify any possible overcoming of these boundaries into criminal law, which only further serves to atomize, destabilize the centrality of its absolute authority. Foucault declares that, "...for a whole series of reasons, the idea of a morality as obedience to a code of rules is now disappearing, has already disappeared. To this absence of a morality, one responds, or must respond, with an investigation which is that of an aesthetics of existence" (453). Foucault means by the aesthetics of existence, "... an ongoing formation and articulation of the self according to aesthetic criteria. The primary criterion apparently is the will to 'live a beautiful life and to leave to others memories of a beautiful existence.' Such an ethics, Foucault hopes, could in no way be implicated in"an attempt to normalize the population" (White 428).

The question of human nature though was driven by the concrete, institutional demands made of the individual to conform to some always more 'natural' way of life, and not by idealized scientific curiosity. Sovereignty then gets reinstated back within the individual, in the form of internalized norms and with the aim of total self-regulation. But this distinction is firstly and always a hypothesis, Foucault says, "...it goes for the concept of human nature: 'nothing in man-not even his body-is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition.' In the wake of this 'death of Man,' we are faced with the challenge of exercising our freedom and fashioning our shared forms of life" (Longford 572). We must each take it upon ourselves to figure out a correct balance between the normal and

the pathological. Now the pathological is no longer met with death but with correction, the right to life gets affirmed everywhere, and much of biopolitics could be characterized by the ‘overturning’ of sovereign martial law by the individual affirmation of rights. In this historical stage, “...biological existence was reflected in political existence; the fact of living was no longer inaccessible substrate that only emerged from time to time, amid the randomness of death” (Foucault 142). The political subject becomes all that could possibly be a human life, biology is broadly unable to oppose biopower, and we even find a site of potential resistance rather in the opening up of the symbolic. Thus, biopower has completed its sufficient deconstruction of sovereignty, to the extent that it is so able to.

She goes on to point out that deconstruction’s analysis of this situation is also part and parcel of the very structure of sovereignty. This was essentially the terms of the sovereign as it had already existed in itself, before it became subjected to deconstruction at all. As Malabou states her concern, “The self and the body that are thus formed and transformed are not the biological ones ... we have two bodies in one” (Malabou 104). It has only changed the terms of the power wielded by sovereignty, always redeciding how much to place on each side of the biological and the symbolic, and will not bring the matter to its end. Some would say that its deconstruction is necessary regardless of the difficulties that will arise, that it is intolerable, or worse, self-destructive. Malabou believes that Foucault would seem to think as much, and also that she is going to do him one better.

She argues that biology is able to actually complete the deconstruction, primarily due to its more recent advancement of non-determinate notions such as plasticity, epigenetics, etc. If plasticity is inside the biological, this opens within organic life its own indeterminacy. The dynamics of a material life need not follow from a transcendental symbolic economy. Insofar as biological processes are anterior to discursive ones in the mere ordering of life, it would seem that scientific results will dictate that we must attempt to forge this path either way. This divide has woefully been the, “Scarlet letter printed by sovereignty on the philosophical body” (104). Science meanwhile is busy performing an archaeology of the materiality of the field of biological concepts, where we seemingly arrive at a point in which the potential meaning of criticism has no hold over the facts of the matter. To call these facts even is to mask that they are nothing less than the barest form of matter in itself, prior to any conception of fact. A description of the cardiovascular system, for example, admits of no obvious problem of political ideology or cultural relativism. Of course, we could come up short in our experimental effort, but this would be resolved only as a matter of performing further biological research and not by meager deconstruction. In a certain strong sense naturalism and contingency are entirely at odds with one another, “The biological ‘drive’ or ‘force’ conceives of the ‘internal principal’ of the living movement as its purpose or as the possibility of its actuality; the internal principle is the drive or force that serves the reproduction of this form of life in each particular instance and specimen. Biologically conceived, then,

to live means to realize those purposes that constitute the form or the species of the organism” (Menke 194). But certainly it also holds that for biology, all of the processes which happen to make up life as it presently exists could have been radically otherwise.

In *Discipline & Punish*, we find that power is already operating through a cellular notion in its division and organization of society into institutions like the school and the military barracks, with their well-ordered buildings (Foucault 156). Furthermore, all factory machinery within a certain space follows in the same manner. If we achieve in improving upon the biological concept, even more organized discipline may be what will readily follow. Biology cannot give us a way to cut between two kinds of individuality, that of the disciplinary/control society and that of another kind that resists it, biopower is both at the same time a modern diffuse sovereign and its biopolitical deconstruction. The question arises how at any point we could apply a sense of meaning to biological concepts without introducing what are not yet sufficiently biological forms of normativity (i.e. discursive, historical, dialectical, deconstructive). It is not that freedom is simply the capacity to resist empirical findings, or the fate of biological law. Malabou levels an atheistic argument against Foucault for granting any significance to the body as constituting the soul or spirit.

The dialectic which holds between biological and hypothesized spirit reveals an essential non-substantiality of all speculative matter. Foucault’s theory then is a qualified antivitalism of life: any attempted ideological vitalisation thereof is not in itself a ready form of resistance to sovereignty; this act indeed constitutes one of the primary repetitive functions of the dispersed administrative reproductive order. Malabou concludes with the suggestion that, “The becoming obsolete of the notion of program in biology opens new conditions...” (Malabou 105). In matter of fact biology as it presently exists increasingly becomes tied up in high-cost, private, corporate research groups. The effect the becoming obsolete of the notion of program would have on biology would be to remove any other entity’s capacity to subject this concrete-block of the institutionalized biological sciences to further criticism. For example, we could begin to look at any of those communities which do not individually have billions of dollars tied up in state of the art biotechnologies. It might turn out to be that all of these forms of life are indeed by extension obsolete. The hope is that they will be redeemed by, “New conditions of experience, new thresholds rationality, as well as new philosophical and theoretical paradigms” (105). These resources wherever they actually become produced will clearly be utilized by remnant forces of sovereignty toward the ends of their own interests. By all accounts the aim should be the, “...shaping, repairing, remodeling of connections, and in consequence a certain amount of self-transformation of the living being” (105). However, for what reason should biology privilege this norm over another, say even its exact reversal? We can all agree that the science of life definitely gets a hold over life, but without explicitly stated reasons, why should it not aim at destroying life, or leaving life exactly as it already is? “The struggle (between biology and aesthetics) over life is thus a struggle for freedom. Whether life or nature is biological or aesthetic

decides the possibility of freedom. Only if we limit our biological definition and oppose an aesthetic one can freedom be thought (and thus exist)” (Menke 105).

In an essay on power Krips states that, “Just as the agents of subjection may be unaware of the broader strategies of subjection to which their local exercises of power belong, so too are the agents of resistance” (Krips 178). It is always a question of whether the work that the biologist is performing is a resistance or not, to whichever ideology already held by the practitioner themselves, to that of the lab and its adherents, to its network of contacts and their general philosophy, etc. And these problems can only be rooted out critically, not through an ordinary analysis of the processes of life as is in either case is readily supposed to have been taking place. “More generally, any act of resistance—for instance, the defiance of some local exercise of subjection may be turned against its agent and incorporated against his or her will within a broader strategy of subjection. But this turning may leave intact the role of the action as an act of resistance so that it assumes a dual role as both an act of resistance and an exercise of power” (178). Since both deliberate attempts to resist or to not resist may fail to reach their ends, “...an artistic approach to ethics should include a self-critical analysis of the relation between power and aesthetics. The project of using an “aesthetic” sensibility to oppose the barbarism of American life might here draw upon the Frankfurt school insight that labor too is a technique of self, and acknowledge warnings about the commodity fetishism lurking in the shadows of the aesthetic gaze” (Bennett 666). Resistance usually manifests itself transitorily in a given context, not as per the dictates of such a stable program. While any revolutionary program should attempt to bring a biological science under its wing, there can be no formation made up around this study specifically. And it may even seem odd to pick out biology, which is a technical and abstract study, but the problem is anybody who would affirm an absolute relation to life over every other. The subject’s distance from life is speculative, relational, an always incomplete notion.

It could appear confusing on what level the prescriptive normativity within Foucault’s work is operating on. Because in *Discipline & Punish* and *History of Sexuality*, he proceeds with an analysis of certain other dysfunctional normativities that would seem to leave his own preferences often undisclosed. The prescriptive part of Foucault’s writings often goes carefully concealed inside an aesthetics of existence, “...it understands life as not teleological (or even anti-teleological), as not functional (or even dysfunctional)” (Menke 104). In opposition to ethical principles which are externalized and encroach onto the domain of others’ bodies, the aesthetic norm is consciously internalized by its practitioner, “The aesthetic movements and alterations of the living body are the expression of an inner principle, a force, but they do not fulfill a function. They are not performed in order to realize a purpose, but unfold without a direction or purpose” (104). The aesthetic life is worth living in itself and not for the sake of something else beyond it. It is also enacted in the world through the form which their creative works take, “...the constructed character of moral agents and principles comes to the fore as they are likened to pieces of work like

sculptures, carvings, pottery, to things worked and reworked in ways never free from the mark or force of prior embodiments, intentions, or accidents” (Bennett 667). It becomes most obvious where the entirety of the notion of ‘plasticity’ comes from that is actually doing any productive work for epigenetics. “Second, insofar as”art” is thought to call for a special mode of perception, that is, an attention to things as sensuous ensembles (scenes, songs, stories, dances)” (667). This work may have a progressive historical character where it is subject to change through dialogue, “...an artistic representation of ethics may reveal with special force its structural or network character” (667). In a similar fashion, an aesthetic norm could furthermore become deliberately internalized by a community. “Even if Foucault himself is not very helpful in establishing a link between aesthetic and juridical aspects of subjectivity, one can try to speculate about how such a link might be established. One might point out, for example, that an aesthetics of existence could not literally be a private activity any more than speaking a language. What constitutes art must always be related to some public, shared understanding of style and form” (White 428). What it would require is for the norm to freely conform to each individual’s personal taste. That unique circumstance may only be cultivated through a concern for the self and its construction. Langford notes that, “...Such an art of the contingent self heightens our awareness of the contingencies and differences cross-cutting all identities, thereby helping militate against the indifference, resentment, and cruelty toward others which sometimes flow from aggressive attempts to universalize, glorify, and defend them” (Langford 574). The mere recognition of risk is not necessarily a demand for chaos, in fact it is necessary wherever we hope to have any chance to stave off random violence.

Foucault must make difficult choices about the places where he will not completely draw out ‘both sides’, as he relates, “I believe too much in the truth not to assume that there are different truths and different ways of saying it” (Foucault 453). Part of his theory entails this neither can nor should be done, instead our methodology consists of a localism and its historiography, “...a careful reading of Foucault’s writings and comments on the art of the self shows that they call for practices which reveal the contingency and fragility of the self as a product of a web of contingent events and relationships, and promote cautious, piecemeal experimentation with transforming inherited identities, vocabularies, and forms of life whose maintenance and defense inflict gratuitous suffering and cruelty” (Langford 590).

In a later interview titled “Aesthetics of Existence”, it has been seven years since the writing of *Discipline & Punish* and *History of Sexuality*. Foucault is lamenting his inability to have followed through with his original plan for their writings and possibly an impotency in producing grand historical change. He laments, “...now the time had come when I could write ... but I almost died of boredom writing these books,” published in 1975 and 1976, drawn from the middle period of his writing career (453). Is the book then constituted by material processes that exist entirely anterior in life to reason, or does it according to Foucault fill in the most apparent place of symbolic destitution for

biological subjection? He argues, “The aesthetics of existence demands that one continuously risk oneself and one’s thinking in practices such as writing” (450). In the writing of a book, “...one wants very much to modify completely what one thinks and to find oneself at the end completely other than what one was at the start. Then one perceives that really one has changed very little. One has changed perspectives, one has turned the problem around, but it’s always the same problem” (450).

Malabou notes that the same type of encoding process occurs in the difference between DNA and epigenetics as exists between the reading and writing of a book. In the end it can be seen that domains of aesthetics and biology offer promise for direct change happening on the individual, which can often be read as disciplinary, normative, regulative, but also a more liberating general transformation of the anonymous self. “Rather than unwittingly justifying or celebrating whatever Foucault’s critics mean by ‘nihilism’, this stance enables the ethical practice of freedom that Foucault conceives of in terms of ‘aesthetics of existence ... that takes its point of departure from the absence of a moral code or a general normative schema” (Prozorov 54). The consequences will be all the greater depending on who enters into this project, for what reasons, with what motivations. A dialectic occurring simply between the historical and biological cannot transcend the need for making the aesthetic decision. Life and a corresponding science and technology of life may get affirmed absolutely by one party as a speculative maneuver, and this will definitely achieve certain ends, but this does not position anyone in an absolute connection with it.

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