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Identity and Causality: Foucault's Subject and Kant's Third Antinomy

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ABSTRACT

Foucault's work is concerned with the formation of the subject through self-knowledge: the individual is subject to dominating forms of power or the subject themselves. Pastoral power is a form of power that provides self-knowledge to the subject as identity while also convincing the subject that identity is essential to the individual and their body. To liberate the individual from these forms of power, the individual must create new forms of identity by developing their own self-knowledge. This is Foucault's ethics of freedom, which is similar to Kant's morality as it is related to the third antinomy. For Kant, causes through freedom and determined causal nature are compatible with each other. The individual can lead a moral, free life if morality is pulled out of the causal realm. By avoiding making choices as means to an end, thus pulling it out of the causal realm, one can make free and moral choices for the thing in itself. For Foucault, pastoral power belongs to the causal chain. To free the individual from the causal chain, one must practice ethics as the care of self, in which they form their own self-knowledge that avoids the essentialism of causal identity. Freedom is the necessary condition for these ethics. By liberating oneself from the chain of causality, the individual can create identity.

KEYWORDS

Causality, Identity, Ethics, Free Will, Determinism

INTRODUCTION

Foucault discusses Kant's "Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?" essay¹ as a moment that asks about the present state of philosophy and modernity in general. He claims that this essay, for the first time, looks back on and examines ourselves. Foucault ([1982] 2000, 335) says, "[c]ompare this with the Cartesian question: Who am I? ... But Kant asks something else: What are we?" Foucault takes up the Kantian project that seeks to prevent philosophy from going beyond possible experience to make metaphysical claims, including the metaphysical claim of the essence of identity. For Foucault, this Kantian project is a critical project that looks back at our own subjectivity; he takes it a step further by returning to an analysis of empirical conditions in his genealogical work. Though Foucault isn't a transcendental philosopher, it can be considered that he continues Kant's critical project.

In section I, this paper will discuss Michel Foucault's work as it is primarily concerned with the formation of the subject. "Pastoral power" is a form of power that offers the subject self-knowledge; in believing the knowledge of themselves as offered by different disciplines and structures, the subject reproduces this knowledge in their action. Pastoral power also seeks to convince the subject that identity is essential to the individual. Foucault shows through his work that identity is not essential to the individual, but is created by the individual.

In section II, I will show that Foucault's ethics of freedom shares an important similarity with Kantian morality: they both believe that to live an ethical life, morality must be removed from the determinism of causal nature. Kant's morality is built on the third antinomy: are there causes through freedom (free will), or is there no freedom in causal nature (determinism)? Kant's answer is that both are compatible with each other, if appearances are attributed to phenomena and the thing in itself to noumena. He carries this through his morality: to live a moral life, the individual must extract morality from causal nature and it must be performed for the thing in itself. Foucault's ethics can be considered in a similar way: he believes that ethics itself is a practice of freedom. If pastoral power is part of causal nature, then the individual must liberate themselves from it through a practice of freedom.

1. Kant and the Enlightenment is discussed in Foucault's "What is Enlightenment?" (2000) and also "The Subject and Power" ([1982] 2000).

I. FOUCAULT: PASTORAL POWER AND ESSENTIAL IDENTITY

Michel Foucault's work is largely concerned with the formation of the subject. He explores this through two forms of subjectivity: the individual is subject to what he calls "pastoral power" of dominating institutions and disciplines, and simultaneously, the individual is subject to their own self-knowledge. Pastoral power, through its complex and totalizing methods, seeks to convince the subject that identity is essential to the individual.

A. Pastoral Power in its Early and Modern Forms

In Foucault's "The Subject and Power" essay and *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling* lectures at the Catholic University of Louvain, the form of pastoral power originated in the early Christianity of roughly the first through fifth centuries, A.D. Two of the main distinguishing aims of pastoral power of early Christianity seek to assure salvation in the afterlife, and cultivate the inner life or soul of the individual.² These aims were used as techniques of power that seek to convince the subject of a truth being produced. The church preached this: to be saved, the individual must atone for their sins through penance. This also concerns the entirety of the subject, viz. their life within the church, outside of the church, and even *after* their life on Earth. The individual, believing this truth, makes themselves a subject to the church by reproducing and confirming this truth, especially in the act of penance.

The aims of pastoral power needed to change so that it could reach beyond the church. Rather than assuring salvation in the afterlife, the aim was to assure salvation in the present life. Salvation took on different forms for different disciplines: for example, with the medical discipline, salvation is health; with the police state, salvation is security and safety of the population.

In *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, Foucault (2014) makes this connection by relating sin and penance (of Christian pastoral power) to disease and medicine (of modern pastoral power). The promise of salvation in the next life mirrors the promise of well-being for the patient; Foucault (2014, 183) says, "'penance was a medicine ... [o]ne was sick, and sin was an illness or sin was a wound.'" In *The Birth of the Clinic* ([1963] 1994) the gaze and verbalization of symptoms between the

2. Foucault also discusses two additional characteristics, the other two being: the form is prepared to sacrifice itself, and that it is concerned with both the community and the individual, for their entire lives (Foucault [1982] 2000, 333).

doctor and patient simultaneously gathered symptoms that point to and represent disease, while at the same time created the organization of the disease and its symptoms. A type of self-knowledge is offered to the patient, who is both subject and object of this knowledge. Through self-governing, the individual's belief of authority manifests in their actions: the individual performs an action, following the doctor's orders. The medical discipline then offers the individual knowledge of themselves, and the individual believes this knowledge and acts on it.

B. Self-Knowledge and Creating Identity

This knowledge also includes the notion that identity is essential to the individual. *The Birth of the Clinic* touches on the theme of essences. The medical discipline after the eighteenth century created a rational order of diseases with carefully and systematically organized symptoms. "It is a space in which analogies define essences," to the extent that "the order of disease is simply a 'carbon copy' of the world of life" (Foucault, [1963] 1994, 6-7). The medical discipline's ordered inventory of symptoms and diseases sets out to be an exact description of something that is extended within the body. The effect of this methodology is not only individualizing, but totalizing, viz., it applies to the individual patient and also all individual bodies.

Both pastoral power and Foucault's definition of the "subject" are clarified in his "The Subject and Power" essay ([1982] 2000, 331):

This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word "subject": subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge.

The disciplines that Foucault talks about throughout his work exemplify this form of power: the prison system, the education system, the family, the medical discipline, and the church use dominating methods not by explicitly coercing the subject, but by making the subject believe a truth of themselves as well as contributing to the individual's self-knowledge. Once the subject believes this

truth, they also reproduce it in their self-governed actions. The primary question for the subject is “Who am I?” or “Who are we?” and pastoral power offers an answer. The medical discipline’s answer is that the individual is essentially its anatomical systems, and any sickness must be expelled by a doctor in order for one to be well. For Christianity, the individual’s essence is their soul, and sin must be purged from it through penance in order to save it from the damnation of hell. Pastoral power is thus concerned with the self-knowledge of individual’s essence – in other words, the identity that is essential to the individual.

“The Subject and Power” and other essays and interviews also touch on intersecting notions of identity including gender and sexuality, and other philosophers and social theorists use Foucault’s tools of analysis in critical theory on race and class. The identity that these disciplines seek to dominate is not only the essence of the soul, but also the intersecting notions of identity at the center of current struggles. Individuals are stigmatized and punished based on identity that are managed by forms of pastoral power; identity is reproduced in action by the individual. Pastoral power does not rest in a singular entity like the state; rather, it is complex, multiple, and reproduced by each individual as they believe different truths of their identity.

But for Foucault, identity is not essential to the individual or to bodies. Through new forms of subjectivity, the individual can reject the identity that is the subject of forms of pastoral power. To return to “The Subject and Power,” Foucault says, “[m]aybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are” ([1982] 2000, 336). He goes on:

The conclusion would be that the political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state, and from the state’s institutions, but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization linked to the state. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries.

A new form of subjectivity would mean that the individual would not accept the identity that has been imposed on them by pastoral power, but instead create identity in action and becoming. Rather than the expose an essential truth of identity that is found within the self, new forms of subjectivity would emphasize

creativity, and would create culture and identity without the limits imposed by dominating forces.

II. FOUCAULT AND KANT

If the guiding question at hand is "Can we *freely* change our self-identity?" then Foucault's answer is yes, through these new forms of subjectivity, which Foucault later develops into his ethics. But to illuminate Foucault's ethics as they are related to the concept of freedom, they must be put into the light of Kant's ethics, specifically as they are related to the third antinomy and morality. For Kant, free will and determinism are compatible with each other when split into appearances of phenomena and the thing in itself of noumena. His morality depends on this as well: moral choices need to be pulled out of the causal nature of phenomena, and performed noumenally for the thing in itself. Foucault's ethics can be considered in a similar way. If pastoral power belongs to causal necessity, Foucault's ethics require the individual to liberate themselves from the causal chain. For Foucault, freedom is the necessary condition for an ethical life.

A. Kant's Third Antinomy and Morality

Kant's discussion of the third antinomy and its relevance to morality can be used to illuminate Foucault's ethics. In the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* ([1783] 2001, 75) the third antinomy is this:

Thesis

There are in the world causes through freedom.

Antithesis

There is no freedom, but all is nature.

On one hand, the thesis states that there are causes through freedom, or to put it another way, there are causes that are not themselves an effect of another cause. On the other hand, the antithesis states that all is causal nature, in other words, every cause is itself an effect of a preceding cause, and that preceding cause is itself an effect, ad infinitum. For Kant, both the thesis and antithesis are compatible with each other, if causes through freedom is attributed to things in

themselves (noumena) and causal nature is attributed to the appearance of things (phenomena).

Now I may say without contradiction that all the actions of rational beings, so far as they are appearances (encountered in some experience), are subject to the necessity of nature; but the same actions, as regards merely the rational subject and its faculty of acting according to mere reason, are free (Kant [1783] 2001, 80).

This follows through to his morality in *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* ([1785] 1993). The thesis suggests that we have free will; the antithesis suggests everything is determined. For Kant, this division of freedom and causality, or noumena and phenomena, is important to lead a moral life. Morality must be pulled out of phenomena and attributed entirely to noumena; it must be completely removed from the causality of the phenomenal realm.

In the *Grounding*, morality must follow this *a priori* formal principle rather than an *a posteriori* empirical incentive. In willing an incentive, there is no freedom, because "in willing an object as my effect there is already thought the causality of myself as an acting cause" ([1785] 1993, 27). For Kant, a maxim must be performed for the thing in itself, instead of a possible outcome of the maxim. In willing an effect, the person who does the willing already considers themselves as the cause; themselves as cause means they are also an effect of another cause. The individual willing an effect is then determined, and puts themselves into the chain of causality. But if the thing is done for itself, then the effect doesn't make a difference, and the individual is not in that chain. Furthermore, Kant goes on to develop this into the categorical imperative: only in the noumenal realm of the thing in itself can there be universal, objective moral law.

B. Foucault on Pastoral Power and Causality

Foucault takes a similar stance in that ethics must be removed from causality. Freedom, as expressed in the thesis of the third antinomy, is the necessary condition for leading an ethical life. Pastoral power belongs to the causal nature of the antithesis in the third antinomy.

1. Causality and Salvation

The causality of pastoral power is in its aim, the incentive of salvation. With the pastoral power of early Christianity, the purpose of penance is intended for the aim of salvation in the afterlife. By assuring the individual that sin is the truth of themselves, penance in Christianity works not only as a verbal admission that the individual is essentially sinful, but also the necessary act in order to save themselves and secure salvation.

[W]hat is important within Christianity seems to me to be far more this relationship to the individual to his truth than the problem of sin. ... What seems to me to have been the essence of Christianity and to have made a break in the history of Western subjectivity is the technique, the relationship of truth, and all the techniques put forward and perfected to draw out the truth of oneself with regard to sin (Foucault 2014, 117).

The individual admits that they are sinful in penance. In the *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling* lectures, Foucault describes the different forms of penance in early Christianity: from penance as a ritual performed only once during a person's life, to a life of penance as complete submission, and then finally to the form of confession that we're familiar with today. For the church to convince the individual that it can assure salvation, this admittance of sin by the individual is necessary. The individual must believe this truth --they are guilty of sin and that sin is within them. The affirmation of truth also affirms that penance is necessary to redeem them.

Pastoral power offers the individual a path to salvation in the afterlife; salvation is the willed incentive that Kant discusses in *Grounding*. The church's ethics are within the causal chain: in willing the *effect* of incentive of salvation, the individual in the act of penance is the *cause*. Though the church may offer a multitude of other ethical values, if according to Foucault one of the main distinguishing characteristics of pastoral power is the promise of salvation, then it lacks the moral content that Kant discusses in the *Grounding*. The act of penance or the confession of sin is not performed for the act in itself, or even the immediate effects of the act, but for an effect or incentive. Even if the afterlife is considered something outside possible experience, the aim of salvation in the afterlife concerns something essentially a part of the individual: their soul. This

also applies to the modern form of pastoral power. In the example of the medical discipline, salvation has expanded to mean health and well-being. The incentive or intended *effect* of health and well-being necessarily includes the individual and prescribed actions as a *cause*, therefore this is within the causality of the phenomenal realm. When individuals are made subjects to the modern pastoral power of the medical discipline, they are a part of the deterministic causal chain.

2. Causality and Identity

Causality in pastoral power can also be seen through Foucault's take on the semiotic system of signifier and signified. In *Birth of Clinic*, for the individual under the doctor's examination, the signifier was a symptom that not only pointed to the signified disease, but the order of the symptoms also completely represented the disease itself. This system is also applied to modern forensic psychiatry, which Foucault discusses in the sixth lecture of *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*. The discipline of psychiatry extended to the criminal justice system with an eye on the criminal. It was no longer enough to consider the crime itself punishable; forensic psychiatry in the judicial system needed to ask *who* the criminal was. The crime itself would be a signifier of something signified within the criminal, like the symptom that signified a disease within the patient. The signified diseases were the psychiatric categories that developed at the end of the nineteenth century: necrophilia, kleptomania, exhibitionism, and homosexuality, among others. Foucault (2014, 221) goes on to describe this in terms of causality in psychiatry:

Madness then appeared to be the cause of that which made no sense, and the lack of responsibility established itself within that gap. But with this new analysis of instinct and emotions, there arose the possibility of a causal analysis of all conduct, whether criminal or noncriminal and whatever its degree of criminality. At this point, the juridical and psychiatric problem of crime entered an infinite labyrinth: if an act was determined by a causal nexus that the analysis of the criminal subject could uncover – if, then, an act was determined by such a causal nexus, could it be considered to be free?

The causality of psychiatric categories is explicit in the signifier-signified form, but perhaps less explicit in the contemporary terms that we are familiar with today. Homosexuality, for example, is no longer in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual

of Mental Disorders, but remains as an identity of sexuality. A wide amount of research has concluded that homosexuality is the effect of biological cause, or possibly a mix of genetic, environmental, and hormonal factors (Frankowski 2004). Considered this way, identity belongs to causal nature, whether it's sexual identity, criminal identity, or cultural identity. In this form of psychiatric power and the wider form of pastoral power, identity is the effect of a cause. The causes range from biological to historical, from childhood trauma to diet, all depending on the form of power. Thus, identity as a result of these forms of power is entirely deterministic, and completely a part of the causal chain, the antithesis of the third antinomy.

Returning to the question "Can we *freely* change our self-identity?", if the thesis and antithesis of the third antinomy aren't compatible with each other, the answer would be *no*. If free will and determinism are not compatible, then our identities are determined by factors out of our control. But for Kant, freedom and causal nature are compatible, and one can lead a free and ethical life by withdrawing moral choices from causality and making these choices based on the thing in itself. Foucault says something similar in his own ethics of freedom.

C. Foucault on Ethics as a Practice of Freedom

Q. You say that freedom must be practiced ethically...

M.F. Yes, for what is ethics, if not the practice of freedom, the conscious [*réfléchi*e] practice of freedom?

Q. *In other words, you understand freedom as a reality that is already ethical in itself.*

M.F. Freedom is the ontological condition of ethics. But ethics is the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection (Foucault [1984] 1997a, 284).

For Foucault, freedom is the necessary condition of an ethical life. The issue of liberation from individualizing and totalizing forms of pastoral power should not aim to liberate people from an entity such as the state, but liberation should be manifested by the individual as a practice of freedom. Pastoral power imposes on the subject knowledge about themselves; to be free of the determinism of

pastoral power, the practice of freedom means the individual must make themselves a subject of their own self-knowledge and create new forms of identity. Rather than being limited to the identity produced by pastoral power's causal chain, one must form identity in new, multiple, and creative ways. Rather than believing that one must discover an identity that has been lurking within them, one should instead re-imagine and reconstruct what identity should mean for them. Foucault ([1984] 1997b, 163) expresses this in regards to sexuality:

Sexuality is a part of our behavior. It's a part of our world freedom. Sexuality is something that we ourselves create—it is our own creation, and much more than the discovery of a secret side of our desire. We have to understand that with our desires, through our desires, go new forms of relationships, new forms of love, new forms of creation. Sex is not a fatality: it's a possibility for creative life.

Sexuality and any form of identity—gender, race, and culture—is something that we create, not something that is essential to ourselves and the world. Furthermore, the development of self-knowledge and self-reflection that Foucault discusses in his ethics is influenced by the Stoic philosopher Seneca. He contrasts the different techniques that Stoic philosophy prescribes to form the subject with the system of penance and confession in early Christianity.

Self-examination for Seneca was not a search within the individual that resembles the search for an illness in the pastoral power of the medical discipline. The technique of self-writing is not like an intimate diary, narrative of life, or secret confession; it is an administrative, non-judgmental inventory. Instead of committing sin, the individual analyzes mistakes against their own ethical code, and makes a plan on how to avoid these mistakes in future action. Most importantly and in line with Foucault's ethics of freedom, these Stoic techniques also emphasize liberation and self-mastery. In *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, Foucault talks about about self-writing as an inventory of dependencies as seen in Seneca's letters to Seneca.

[This] is not at all an index of the presence in him of a hidden desire or concupiscence. It is simply an indicator of liberty. It is an indicator of liberty that allows him to say: "This is what I can do

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without, and this is what I am still unable to give up” (Foucault 2014, 102).

This inventory of dependencies enables the individual to examine their liberation and also the things they still need to be liberated from. This is a part of a wider discussion on the care of self in Greek philosophy. Foucault describes the care of self as a practice of freedom as ethics. Not only does the individual need to “know thyself” but also to develop themselves independently. The care of self also requires the individual to take into consideration the different forms and methods of subjectivity, including those of dominating structures. By refuting the essentialism of pastoral power, the individual creates their own self-knowledge through self-reflection, and through action, agency, and becoming, creates new identity.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, Foucault’s work is concerned with the formation of the subject. Dominating forms of power impose self-knowledge onto the subject, which the subject must *believe* in order to reify. Pastoral power is a form of power that provides self-knowledge to the subject as identity while also convincing the subject that identity is essential to the individual and their body. To liberate the individual from these forms of power, the individual must create new forms of identity through their own self-knowledge. This is Foucault’s ethics of freedom, which is similar to Kant’s morality as it is related to the third antinomy. For Kant, causes through freedom and determined causal nature are compatible with each other. The individual can lead a moral, free life if morality is pulled out of the causal realm. By avoiding making choices as means to an end, thus pulling it out of the causal realm, one can make free and moral choices for the thing in itself. For Foucault, pastoral power belongs to the causal chain. To free the individual from the causal chain, one must practice ethics as the care of self, in which they form their own self-knowledge that avoids the essentialism of identity. Freedom is the necessary condition for these ethics. By liberating oneself from the chain of causality, the individual can create identity rather than become a subject to dominating forms of power.

The antinomy of freedom versus causal nature was an important concept in modern philosophical thought. While many later philosophers in the nineteenth century and beyond worked to supersede this duality, Kant’s critiques still

influence contemporary thought, even if the concepts have been broken apart and only tiny pieces remain, all scattered across theory. Foucault's work may contain some of these pieces, but cannot be considered transcendental philosophy, since many differences and rifts between the two philosophers remain, not to mention Foucault criticized transcendental philosophy in his own work.³

Future research on this subject will explore the similarities and differences between Kant and Foucault and also address current criticism. Contemporary critiques of Foucault claim that his ethics of freedom and creativity champions neoliberalism.⁴ But there's a difference between the ideology of individualism that we're familiar with through contemporary Marxist interpretations and the individual empowerment of Foucault's ethics. The ideology of individualism itself is a type of self-knowledge that the dominating form of power tries to impose on the subject. There are also the ideologies that perpetuate totalizing and individualizing racism, sexism, and homophobia. But societal change must start with the individual, with the self as subject. Foucault's ethics of freedom can be seen as a method of praxis, and can be compatible and useful for the politics of the radical left, especially when it comes to transforming thought into action. In the the preface to *Anti-Oedipus*, Foucault ([1976] 2000, 109) gives a guidelines for an anti-fascist handbook:

Do not think that one has to be sad in order to be militant, even though the thing one is fighting is abominable. It is the connection of desire to reality (and not its retreat into the forms of representation) that possesses revolutionary force.

Despite the criticism, Foucault's work stands as very compelling and influential among philosophers and theorists across disciplines. But nothing is safe from criticism, not even Foucault; and like Kant, his work has provided excellent tools to make those very critiques.

3. For a critique of Foucault as transcendentalist, see Colin Koopman's "Historical Critique or Transcendental Critique in Foucault: Two Kantian Lineages" (2010).

4. See recent criticism by Daniel Zamora in Jacobin (2014) and a discussion on Stuart Elden's blog, *Progressive Geographies* (2014).

POSTSCRIPT

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