

Foucault and Humanism: Meditations on an *Ethos* of *Limit*

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MICHEL Foucault's last works on ethics have stirred fundamental discontent, uncertainty and confusion among Foucault scholars.¹ Should we understand his "ethics" to be a "turn" to the subject in contrast to the political critique of its foundations, a genealogy of ancient thought conceived as a history of subjectivity, or a political engagement with an ethics of liberty? Rather than comparing the early Foucault with the later Foucault and distinguishing specific cycles or phases, I turn to Foucault's work in general and attempt to situate it within a map of interlocutors and themes. By providing a Foucauldian response to the humanist controversy between Jean-Paul Sartre and Louis Althusser, I seek to illustrate Foucault's own focal points as both a political and ethical thinker. Since the humanist controversy stages one vital attempt to bridge social theory and ethics through existentialist humanism, I argue that Foucault's intervention into this debate is particularly interesting. This interpretation of humanism is most prominently advocated by Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty who are most fervently refuted by Louis Althusser's theoretical anti-humanism. In a similar move as Martin Heidegger's initial response to Sartre's lecture on *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, Althusser criticizes existentialist humanism for essentializing either man in general or the laborer in particular as the historical subject which can fulfill humanity on the basis of its transcendental attributes of being. To Althusser, this recourse to human essence and the justification of specific conceptions of man is ultimately ideological; it forms an illusion which can be demystified on the grounds of a materialist critique of societal struggles.

I argue that Foucault is located at the intersection of both approaches and, in fact, reconceptualizes the humanist question into a valuable standpoint of immanent social

1 Compare the articles about the moralizing use of Foucault assembled in *The Politics of Moralizing*, eds. Jane Bennett and Michael J. Shapiro (New York: Routledge, 2002); William Connolly asks whether Foucault "is a creative carrier of a generous sensibility ... [o]r a dangerous thinker who threatens political restraint by scrambling fundamental parameters of morality" in "Beyond Good and Evil – The Ethical Sensibility of Foucault," *Political Theory*, 21(3), 365-389, 365; Jeremy Moss edited a volume on *The Later Foucault – Politics and Philosophy* (New York: Sage, 1998), in which he collects essays on Foucault's politics and Foucault's ethics; several authors find a tension between Foucault's care of the self, central in his later works, and his focus on power relations in his earlier works (compare Neve Gordan, "Foucault's Subject: An Ontological Reading," *Polity*, Spring 1999, 1-13; Thomas McCarthy, "The Critique of Impure Reason, Foucault and the Frankfurt School," *Political Theory* 18 (August 1990): 437-69; Arnold I. Davidson, "Archaeology, Genealogy, Ethics," in Foucault, *A Critical Reader*, ed. David Couzens Hoy (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 221-34

critique. To be sure, Foucault himself is highly critical of the term humanism as an axis of reflection, for he considers this theme “too supple, too diverse, too inconsistent.”² Rather a genealogical investigation of its historical relations to other themes and times must be undertaken, to which this paper can only form the beginning. Foucault also criticizes existentialist humanism for similar reasons Althusser does. On the other hand, however, he refrains from rejecting humanism in its entirety and remains critical of Althusser’s anti-humanism.

I aim to make sense of Foucault’s position with respect to the humanist controversy by offering different interpretations of a response to Nietzsche’s challenge of modern thought. I contend that the main reason for both Foucault’s critique of Sartre and Althusser lies in their failed understanding of the Nietzschean heritage for modern thought. Both do not recognize in Nietzsche’s philosophy a “doubly murderous gesture” which kills God *and* the subject, the possibility of general laws *and* man as the empirical-transcendental doublet. Their philosophies remain, therefore, limited and problematic. While Sartre only focuses on the death of values to then subscribe to a metaphysics of freedom, Althusser only focuses on the death of the subject to then subscribe to a metaphysics of a transhistorical materialist dialectic. This criticism notwithstanding, an engagement with Foucault’s interpretation of Nietzsche’s work will show that Foucault does not simply reject both positions. Indeed, as I will argue, Foucault’s work retains the motivation of Sartre’s initial humanist cause *despite* and *through* a comprehensive critique of both traditions. Most importantly, this cause, as understood by Foucault, is concerned with the search for an effective answer to the question as to what extent human beings who are the effects of “the iron hand of necessity shaking the dice-box of chance”³ can work to change the dynamics and contradictions of the specific time in which they live. In an attempt to answer this question, Foucault conceptualizes an *ethos* of limit that aims at the unsettling and pluralization of life forms through a genealogy of historical problems. Rather than using the term humanism, though, Foucault situates this *ethos* in the enlightenment tradition. Indeed, as I will finally come to argue, he radicalizes Kant’s philosophy from the perspective of its own limits and turns it into an ethics of immanent and continuous social critique.

In order to illustrate this argument, I first introduce the humanist controversy between Sartre and Althusser. In the second section, I focus on Foucault’s interpretation of Nietzsche with respect to his work and with respect to both Kant and the humanist controversy. In the final section, I demonstrate a Foucauldian reframing of ideology and experience on the basis of which it is possible to reflect parts of his work, such as the *Louvain Lectures on Truth-Telling as Techniques of Domination*, to exemplify his notion of political and ethical substance.

The humanist controversy: Sartre vis-à-vis Althusser

In an attempt to link what Marxists and Christian critics censure as merely an in-

2 Michel Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010), 44f.

3 Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010), 88f.

dividualistic phenomenology to a theory of human solidarity, Sartre proposes existentialism as a humanism and distinguishes it from the essentialist humanism of the enlightenment. At its core lies the Sartrean interpretation of Friedrich Nietzsche's "God is dead and man killed him" along with Martin Heidegger's philosophy of abandonment, the human condition of *Geworfenheit*: Since there is nothing before being, "existence precedes essence" and "subjectivity must be our point of departure."⁴ While the philosophy of enlightenment has projected a universal idea onto human beings asserting that everyone possesses the same basic qualities, existentialism argues that "man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterwards defines himself."⁵ Since human life is abandoned and can no longer build on any religious guidance, "we must bear the full consequences"⁶ and formulate humanism on the basis that everything is permissible, no fixed values are "inscribed in an intelligible heaven."⁷ Accordingly, the most forceful idiom in Sartre is freedom which is expressed on three interrelated levels: (1) The freedom *from* God and any particular morality (2) entitles human beings *to* freedom (3) to eventually *free* themselves. But what does Sartre imply when he alludes to the liberation of humanity through free choice? What does subjectivity mean in Sartrean existentialism and why does he conceive of subjectivity as the point of departure? It will become clear that existentialist humanism pursues an integration of phenomenology and Marxism through a concept of subjectivity that is predicated on individual agency which *wills* a society of free beings.

The first meaning of the existentialist principle "existence precedes essence" is that "man is not only that which he conceives himself to be" but that which "he makes of himself."⁸ Man's existence consists of "nothing else than the set of man's actions, nothing else than his life."⁹ Now, in order to engender actions in a lifelong project, every human being has to realize freedom as the condition of human life as such. To posit freedom as the human condition does not mean, though, that everyone should do whatever they like. Nor does it mean that all choices are arbitrary or that the faculty of judgment is no longer required. In fact, every situation confronts human beings with choices that are significant not only for them but also for others. To choose means to commit oneself and since my choices matter for others it follows that humanity becomes committed as a whole. Indeed, Sartre is walking an implicit tightrope when he argues that, on the one hand, there are no set norms and everybody must choose without reference to any pre-established values but that, on the other, everybody finds "himself in a complex social situation in which he himself is committed, and by his choices commits all mankind."¹⁰ In fact, Sartre negotiates this tension by inserting humanity into the individual, the subject that is transcended as an abstract concept which contains the whole complexity of mankind on which choice is to be based. This is why Sartre can conceive subjectivity as the "absolute truth" of the Cartesian *cogito*, the *I think therefore I am* which discovers both oneself *and* the existence of others.

4 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, ed. John Kulka, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 20.

5 *Ibid.*, 22.

6 *Ibid.*, 27.

7 *Ibid.*, 28.

8 *Ibid.*, 22.

9 *Ibid.*, 55.

10 *Ibid.*, 45.

“Contrary to the philosophy of Descartes, or of Kant, when we say ‘I think,’ we each attain ourselves in the presence of the other, and *we are just as certain of the other as we are of ourselves*. Therefore, the man who becomes aware of himself directly in the *cogito* also perceives all others, and he does so *as the condition of his own existence*. He realizes that he cannot be anything (...) unless others acknowledge him as such. (...) I cannot discover any truth whatsoever about myself except through the mediation of another. *The other is essential to my existence, as well as to the knowledge I have of myself*. Under these conditions, my intimate discovery of myself is at the same time *a revelation of the other as a freedom that confronts my own* and that cannot think or will without doing so for or against me. We are thus immediately thrust into a *world* that we may call ‘intersubjectivity.’ It is in this world that man decides what he is and what others are.”¹¹

Yet again, we can only be as certain of the other as we are of ourselves, because the other forms part of the self’s subjectivity in the *cogito*. With this understanding of intersubjectivity Sartre attempts to divert the accusation of being an individualist and to transform existentialism into a form of humanism. My existence is predicated on the existence of the other. Therefore, the freedom of the other matters as much to me as my own freedom. In fact, my freedom appears as freedom only through the intersubjective experience which is the condition of my existence. As soon as there is choice and “as soon as there is commitment, I am obliged to will the freedom of others at the same time as I will my own. I cannot set my own freedom as a goal without also setting the freedom of others as a goal.”¹² But as we begin to realize, this concept of intersubjectivity is not social. It does not constitute collective experience, but only constitutes subjective experience. Indeed, the phenomenological notion of subjectivity implies responsibility, for each subject experiences that she can only exist in relation to others and will therefore act responsibly. Thus, every choice is tantamount to a choice of morality, and responsibility becomes the modality of action.

“To use a personal example, if I decide to marry and have children—granted such a marriage proceeds solely from my own circumstance, my passion, or my desire—I am nonetheless committing not only myself, but all of humanity, to the practice of monogamy. I am therefore responsible for myself and for everyone else, and I am fashioning a certain image of man as I choose him to be. In choosing myself, I choose man.”¹³

Although existentialism conceptualizes intersubjectivity, it remains inevitably beholden to the consciousness and behavior of the individual. The subject is thereby turned into both the reader and the producer of meaning;¹⁴ he does not conceive of meaning as a shared discursive space but turns the meaning of a situation back on the individual subject who becomes the meaning-giving agent.

11 *Ibid.*, 41f. (Italics added).

12 *Ibid.*, 48f.

13 *Ibid.*, 24f.

14 Michel Foucault, *Dits et Écrits: I* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1994), 514.

Through responsibility Sartre generalizes a moral vision as the realization of everybody's freedom. It promotes the ideal of a society of free individuals in positive reciprocity mediated by abundant material goods, a socialist collectivity he terms the "city of ends."^{15 16} Although Sartre emphasizes that human beings are projects and project themselves freely into the future—that is, they invent and reinvent themselves against an *unspecified* background of values—he *specifies* free choice as the naturally taken responsibility for mankind and measures action accordingly. An existing subject is a responsible subject and vice versa. Only then can a subject fulfill its being, its authenticity. Unless the invention of subjectivity grasps human existence as Sartre's notion of intersubjectivity, that is the responsibility to maximize the freedom of others, it cannot materialize as an invention for it does not represent a real choice. "We always choose the good," since "nothing can be good for any of us unless it is good for all."¹⁷

Indeed, we can now see that Sartre's humanism rests on a phenomenology which conceives of authenticity as the transcendental being of subjectivity. In contrast to Heidegger's concept of authenticity, Sartre equates this notion with freedom. The subject is authentic to the extent to which it is free, and it is free to the extent to which it acts responsibly. In this light, it becomes clear why Sartre applies the concept of freedom in the imperative mode illustrated in an example he uses during his lecture on humanism. Accordingly, when asked for advice by a student he answered the following: "*You are free, so choose; in other words, invent. No general code of ethics can*

15 Jean-Paul Sartre, "*What Is Literature?*" and *Other Essays* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988), 166.

16 Sartre tries to link himself to the ideals of traditional Marxism by including the social necessity of violence and terror as a dialectical negation and form of existentialist existence. Thomas Flynn notices that it was only toward the end of his life that "Sartre admitted that he had not succeeded in reconciling the two equally necessary social concepts of fraternity and violence (terror)" (Thomas R Flynn, *Sartre, Foucault, and Historical Reason - Toward and Existentialist Theory of History*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 260; compare also footnote 43 on the same page.). That his theory of choice, freedom and responsibility cannot hide a deeply engrained rationale of totality and conceives the existentialist signifier to be in a privileged position of historical knowledge is made explicit in Sartre's unperturbed answer in the discussion following his lecture on humanism. "When all is said and done, whenever we present our theories in the classroom, *we agree to dilute our thinking in order to make it understood, and that doesn't seem like such a bad thing. If we have a theory of commitment, we must be committed to the very end. If existentialist philosophy is, first and foremost, a philosophy that says 'existence precedes essence,' it must be experienced if it is to be sincere. To live as an existentialist means to accept the consequences of this doctrine and not merely to impose it on others in books. If you truly want this philosophy to be a commitment, you have an obligation to make it comprehensible to those who are discussing it on a political or moral plane*" (Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, 55).

With respect to Sartre's understanding of Marxism and its common grounds of existentialist humanism, compare in particular the socialist humanism advocated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty who is considered most influential on Sartre's philosophy. Merleau-Ponty understands the laborer as the embodiment of humanism, and therefore pure, and the modern human condition as inherently evil and violent, and therefore impure. The purity on the side of the laborer deriving from the "instincts of the expropriated masses" is capable of founding humanity through the impure laws of human action, that is, through violence, thereby negating them. "Cunning, deception, bloodshed, and dictatorship are justified if they bring the proletariat into power and to that extent alone" (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror: The Communist Problem* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000), xviii; xix). To be sure, Sartre does not consider the laborer as the historical subject. The historical subject for existentialist humanism, equally aiming at a socialist society in teleological fashion, is tantamount to the *individual signifier*, though, who qualifies for agency the more existentialist she is.

17 *Ibid.*, 24.

tell you what you ought to do; there are no signs in this world.”¹⁸ Choose! Will! Invent! These are the imperatives enshrined in existentialist subjectivity. But they neither imply freedom as unlimited and unconditional choice, nor as the possibility to change shared meaning through intersubjectivity. Rather, they imply a burden of individual responsibility. In fact, the freedom to choose implies a self imprisoned in its ontological body, “left alone and without excuse,” “condemned to be free: condemned, because man did not create himself, yet nonetheless free, because once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does.”¹⁹

Martin Heidegger’s *Letter on Humanism*²⁰ offers a response to Sartre. Therein, he explains why the exchange of terms, the substitution of essence for existence, does not render existentialist humanism less essentialist. On the contrary, “the reversal of a metaphysical statement remains a metaphysical statement.”²¹ It conceptualizes a humanism which “is determined to an already established interpretation of nature, history, world, and the ground of the world, that is, of beings as a whole.”²² To Heidegger, Sartrean humanism, like all other humanisms before him, testify to the forgetfulness of Being, it prolongs the oblivion of the truth of Being and does not invest authenticity. It is not beings that have to be freed, but rather, Being as such. For it is in Being that human beings can be and, indeed, reach a level of authenticity. Thus, Heidegger opposes the Sartrean humanism because “it does not set the *humanitas* of man high enough.” The *humanitas* of man is the relationship of man to Being and the essence of man understood as the shepherd which cares for Being, which guides it to understand the question of Being.²³ However, Heidegger specifies the ways which are best to ask the question of Being. The best way ultimately lies in thinking. “In thinking Being comes to language. Language is the house of Being. In its home man dwells. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home.”²⁴

Louis Althusser, although in many respects different to Heidegger, performs a similar move in criticizing humanism. What is metaphysical for Heidegger is ideological for Althusser; what is thinking in relation to Being for Heidegger is knowledge in relation to the real matter of history for Althusser. To Althusser, the humanism presented by theorists like Sartre or Merleau-Ponty has shown itself to be “an imposture (...), an ideological makeshift (...), an idle wish, unarmed but dangerous.”²⁵ In an attempt to rescue the image and theory of Marx, Althusser separates the early, more anthropological Marx from the late, more theoretical Marx. Whereas Althusser terms the first Marx as ideological and strongly invested in an anthropological, Feuerbachian critique of Hegel, he views the second Marx as more sophisticated and advanced, capable of countering Hegel on his own grounds by providing a dialectic materialism

18 Ibid., 33, emphasis added.

19 Ibid., 29.

20 The German text was first published in 1947 by A. Franke Verlag, Bern; the translation used for this paper is based on the text in Martin Heidegger, *Wegmarken* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann Verlag, 1967), pp. 145-194.

21 Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” in *Basic Writings: From Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco, California: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 232.

22 Ibid., 225.

23 Ibid., 234.

24 Ibid., 217.

25 Louis Althusser, “The Humanist Controversy,” in *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings (1966-67)*, ed. François Matheron (London: Verso, 2003), 253.

that transforms the “ideological notions of Subject and Object” into “matter and thought, the real and the knowledge of the real.”²⁶ Althusser positions himself at the other extreme in disparaging any anthropological concept of man as “epistemological obstacles” which hinder “theory (...) to attain knowledge of its real object.”²⁷ While Sartre essentializes individual agency as human essence, Althusser essentializes the *matter of History*, its *real* object and conceives science as the only possibility of effective social critique.

Science in contrast to social and political institutions can produce mature knowledge such as Marx’s theoretical anti-humanism which Althusser presents as dialectic materialism. Its mature knowledge realizes the *total necessity* of ideology (since nobody can face class struggle as the matter of History in an unmediated way) and the *appearance* of ideology as a totality (since ideologies effectively mask real relations as imaginary relations). On this basis, theoretical anti-humanism can demystify the particular ideology in play as “the *site* of class struggle”²⁸ and develop a different ideology which is more true to the fact that history is essentially a never-ending process of class struggle, of the ongoing struggle between the material base and the ideologically disguised superstructure. On the one hand, Althusser’s anti-humanism attempts to destroy the impression of totality, of “ideology not having any history.” On the other hand, it offers an historical account about the real social forces undergirding the formation of ideologies: “the reproduction of the relations of production, i.e. of capitalist relations of exploitation.”²⁹ Thus, Althusser historicizes specific ideologies as false-consciousness and proposes “a theory of ideology *in general*, in the sense that Freud presented a theory of the unconscious *in general*”³⁰—transhistorical and unexceptional. “There is no practice except by and in an ideology,”³¹ which turns subjects into “concrete individuals” through forms of interpellation. Although these practices give the impression of free will and agency, they ensure the absolute subjection of the individual and thus the reproduction of capitalist structures:

“The individual *is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the [ideology], i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection*, i.e. in order that he shall make the gestures and actions of his subjection ‘all by himself’. *There are no subjects except by and for their subjection*. That is why they ‘work all by themselves.’”³²

Against the background of Althusser’s understanding of history as the socially necessary emergence of ideologies that reproduce relations of production—that is, relations of exploitation—it becomes clear that the transformation and development in his theory refer to a *total, transhistorical process*. While the content of ideologies can be changed, the underlying cause cannot. It is a science of dialectic materialism

26 *Ibid.*, 265.

27 *Ibid.*, 271.

28 Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 147.

29 *Ibid.*, 154.

30 *Ibid.*, 161.

31 *Ibid.*, 170.

32 *Ibid.*, 182.

that can produce the mature knowledge and thereby demystify the socially necessary ideologies of false consciousness.

Both Sartre and Althusser answer Nietzsche's call either with a phenomenology of human essence against the background of the death of God or with a structural analysis of the social relations of capitalist production against the background of the death of individual agency. In both ways, freedom and ideology is conceptualized in metaphysical terms. Either man is condemned to be free or freedom is condemned to be ideological. While freedom is mediated ideologically for Althusser and is in itself a contingent phenomenon conditioned on an advanced science of ideologies, it is absolutely essential for Sartre. What becomes a metaphysics of man's freedom, or humanism, in Sartre, becomes a transhistoricity of ideology, or anti-humanism, in Althusser. Both share a fundamental skepticism towards the Enlightenment project. Certainly, they repudiate Enlightenment notions of freedom, yet, they also retain many of the tradition's fundamental assumptions by virtue of their implicit commitments to metaphysics. Sartre equates human freedom with authenticity and Althusser understands freedom as an idealist imposture which can only mask that good and evil are concepts of "the mighty, the high-placed and the high-minded (...) who claimed the right to create values."³³ In addition, they also share the conception of power as evil, thick, and negative which will be of greater importance once we investigate Foucault's standpoint.

As a result, both positions, although offering vastly disparate views, show remarkable similarities in the form and content of their arguments. We will see that Foucault has a very different take on both Nietzsche and the Enlightenment through which their similarities and differences can be illuminated and eventually reworked. Indeed, Foucault charges Sartre and Althusser in only going half way and thereby missing Nietzsche's novelty in pointing to an exit to the analytic of finitude enshrined in the death of God and the victory of the subject so central to modern thought since Kant. I will first conceptualize Foucault's interpretation of Nietzsche in relation to his own work and to the critical readings of humanism and anti-humanism it provides. Then, in the next section, I offer a Foucauldian answer to the humanist question.

From an analytic of finitude to an *ethos* of limit – Foucault's response to Nietzsche (and Kant)

Most importantly, Nietzsche provides a "veritable *critique*" to the "play of an 'illusion' proper to Western philosophy since Kant"³⁴. In contrast to Sartre and Althusser, who focus on either the death of God or the death of man, Foucault finds in Nietzsche "a *doubly murderous gesture* which, by putting an end to the absolute, is at the same time the cause of the death of man himself."³⁵ Indeed, while Sartre celebrates the *Übermensch* as the ultimately freed being who is capable of murdering God and thereby prove his own existence, and while Althusser interprets the *Übermensch* as the death of man whose freedom is rendered an illusion, Foucault interprets this figure as a metaphor of *two murders*: Not only does he kill God, but he also kills himself, and

³³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy I*, 2.

³⁴ Michel Foucault, *Introduction to Kant's Anthropology* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2008), 124; 121.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 124.

thereby “ridicules” his own existence. As a consequence, the loss of origin is the most crucial point Foucault takes from Nietzsche. To him, Nietzsche does not only refer to a disappearance of authority, a specific set of values or beliefs (as Sartre would have it), or as the realization of an inevitable illusion which can only be called into question dialectically (as Althusser would argue). It is the form, in which the content of values used to be contained, that disappears and with it the possibility of self-critique which has so far enabled its return to its own origins. This form is tantamount to the Kantian subject as “both the *raison d'être* and the source of critical thinking” the originator of truth and the challenge of the same truth. Imprisoned in her own analytic of finitude, this subject is both reader and writer of meaning and cannot move beyond the illusion of modernity Foucault not only links to Kant, but to the phenomenology of Hegel. In Hegel, we find the same in and out of the subject through the subject, a movement that presents “all knowledge of man (...) as either dialecticized or fully dialecticizable.”³⁶

Foucault attempts to discuss systems of knowledge and power critically and investigates the extent to which modernity might be wrong-headed. The full sublation of all knowledge and power is paradoxical to Foucault, because he argues that we *do* find non-dialecticizable moments, that are covered over and are forgotten as a result of historical struggles. He finds instincts that are dominated and settled without being recognized and sublated into new forms of knowledge and power. I argue that it is mainly against this background that Foucault agrees with Nietzsche on the in-existent continuity “between the instincts and knowledge” and focuses rather on “a relation of struggle, domination, servitude, settlement.” Knowledge or truth can “only be a violation of the things to be known, and not a perception, a recognition, an identification of or with those things.”³⁷ Knowledge does not integrate dissenting voices into one unity. Instead, the voices which participate in this struggle for domination represent forces which, in the course of their fight, reach momentary stabilizations which are then taken as the truth. However, these momentary stabilizations are nothing than “a kind of hiatus, in which knowledge will finally appear as the ‘spark between two swords,’”³⁸ as a seeming unification through a dialectical play when in fact there are winners and losers involved who, in turn, are rendered more strong or more weak depending on the meanings they assume in the truth games they have constituted themselves. Importantly, Foucault does *not* consider these fights to be unjust because the produced knowledge is unjustified or because the struggle for domination leads to violent forms of repression; the fact itself that there are stronger and weaker voices does not lead to an unjust situation. His appropriation of Nietzsche does rather suggest that injustice exists when the winner takes his victory as historical proof for *the* truth. For “history knows only one kingdom, without providence or final cause, where there is only ‘the iron hand of necessity shaking the dice-box of chance.’”³⁹ Injustice, thus, refers to the lie of unification against the background of “a precarious system of power.”⁴⁰ It refers to the “malicious”⁴¹ lie, as the

36 Ibid., 123.

37 Michel Foucault, “Truth and Juridical Forms,” in *The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Volume 3: Power*, ed. James D Faubion (New York: New Press, 2000), 9.

38 Ibid., 12.

39 Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 88f.

40 Foucault, “Truth and Juridical Forms,” 12.

41 Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 95.

unity turns out to be “an empty synthesis.”⁴²

This insight allows us to interpret Foucault’s emphasis on the “double break” more precisely. Foucault is not interested in criticizing *specific* contents of knowledge. He interprets Nietzsche’s first murder, the “break between knowledge and things,” as a *possibility* which is methodologically, by virtue of *genealogies*, turned into a standpoint of critique. The challenge of Foucault’s methodological intervention is to introduce possible exit points without specifying any consequential interiority. Thereby, this critique can reveal that “there is only discontinuity, relations of domination and servitude, power relations, [and] it’s not God that disappears but the subject in its unity and its sovereignty.”⁴³ In other words, Foucault is not concerned about God as such, about whether it is good or bad to believe in God. He is concerned about the problem of unity and sovereignty *in history in general*, and the problem of the subject conceived as a unity and sovereignty *in the modern world in particular*.⁴⁴

In marking out the struggle over knowledge and truth as his site of investigation, Foucault constitutes a different knowledge to the universal knowledge Nietzsche fiercely criticizes as both “the grandest and most mendacious.” Indeed, Foucault’s critique inverts proximity and distance and studies what is the nearest, the most particular and unique. He thereby appropriates a type of methodology, which in turn produces knowledge that is very different from the results of the knowledge production it opposes. This type of knowledge is “not made for understanding but for cutting” for it “introduces discontinuity into our very being.”⁴⁵ As we will find out later, this does not mean that understanding does not play a vital role in Foucault’s work. The claim that knowledge is made for cutting rather than for understanding can instead be understood as a theoretical prioritization based on the ethical project to effectively “pronounce the interpretation that all truth functions to cover up.”⁴⁶ Now, Foucault uses numerous terms to characterize this peculiar critical enterprise. The terms that I consider most useful to understand its scope and practice are “effective history”⁴⁷ (*wirkliche Historie*) and “history of problems.”⁴⁸ In combination, both terms allow for the following definition: Any genealogical enterprise investigates the breeding ground of good and evil on the basis of social reality (*Wirklichkeit* not *Wahrheit*, *Herkunft* not *Abstammung*)⁴⁹ to illuminate the problems and contradictions of a specific historical truth game that are, in turn, ultimately disturbed.

42 Ibid., 81.

43 Ibid., 10.

44 To be sure, also history in general for Foucault can only be studied through the perspective of the present, history is always specified for it refers to a present day actuality. We can therefore conclude that also “history in general” is understood through the problems Foucault finds in modern times which is the analytic of finitude and Kant’s illusory anthropological subject as both transcendental and empirical. (Compare in particular Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), last two chapters; Foucault, *Introduction to Kant’s Anthropology*, last section; as well as Michel Foucault, “What Our Present Is,” in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2007), 137ff.).

45 Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 88; 86.

46 Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Freud, Marx,” in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D Faubion (New York: New Press, 1998), 276.

47 Introduced in Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.”

48 Compare in particular Foucault, “What Our Present Is,” 141f.

49 Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” compare specifically pages 77-90.

In this sense, Foucault radicalizes the *ethos* of Kant's "Was ist Aufklärung?" and calls to analyze and reflect upon limits in a *positive* way. This positive "limit-attitude" turns Kant's *Critique* around. While Kant's *Critique* consists in tracking "the contemporary limits of the necessary" and finding out "what is not or is no longer indispensable for the constitution of ourselves as autonomous subjects," Foucault wants to know what the products of arbitrary constraints are to then "transform the critique conducted in the form of necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression."⁵⁰ Transgression, however, does not aim at "letting unheard voices speak" to render them finally recognized, a concept entirely compatible with Kant and Hegel. What Foucault has in mind is a form of invention and creation which he counterposes, on the one hand, to Althusser's notion of science, and on the other hand to Sartre's notion of authenticity. For although Sartre aligns freedom with invention and Althusser seeks to invent new ideologies, they both understand invention as predicated on either the authentic relation man has to himself, or the authentic relation man has to his real materialist history, which is why the possibility of invention is bound to a *specific* subjectivity, be it free man or the mature scientist. Foucault, though, "would like to say exactly the contrary: we should not have to refer the creative activity of somebody to the kind of relation he has to himself, but should relate the kind of relation one has to oneself to a creative activity."⁵¹ In this light, invention becomes a creative activity as the investigation of different relations to oneself, as the unsettling of specific truths which hold invention to be the *product* of a specific relation with oneself.

To summarize thus far, Sartre and Althusser remain trapped in the empirical-transcendental dialectic and fail to realize that power relations constitute both their own illusions and the potentials to unravel them through a genealogy understood as creative activity. On the basis of Foucault's appropriation of Nietzsche, we can clearly distinguish his position on freedom from both Sartre's and Althusser's. Contra Sartre—for whom freedom is the fundamental ontology of subjectivity—and Althusser—for whom freedom is the fundamental illusion—Foucault views freedom, radicalizing Kant, as that which marks a *possibility* and therefore informs the ethical standpoint of immanent and continuous social critique.

"This critique will be genealogical in the sense that it will not deduce from the form of what we are what is impossible for us to do and to know; but it will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, *the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think*. It is not seeking to make possible a metaphysics that has finally become a *science*; it is seeking to *give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom.*"⁵²

To give new impetus, as far and wide as possible and picture freedom as being at work but undefined, this is the goal of Foucault's effective history, histories of problems and creative activity. And ultimately, this coinage of freedom is what gives Foucault's

50 Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment," 43; 45.

51 Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. James Faubion (New York: New Press, 1997), 262.

52 Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment," 46.

methodology its ethical thrust. The critical enterprise Foucault introduces cares about knowledge that can effect change through creation, an *ethos* of limit which, rather than seeking to incorporate exteriority into the same, endeavors to “liberate the profusion of lost events”⁵³ in taking exteriority as the crucial indicator to unsettle the maliciously claimed truth of the present. Foucault therefore assumes the position of a skeptic who cannot specify any specific program, life form or liberation strategy, nor is he interested in making lost events reappear as events on the stage of historical process. Indeed, he does not take the *standpoint* of exteriority but exteriority as a “*guiding theme*.”⁵⁴ He is interested in the emergence of different interpretations. The “authentic one,” the “true one” is therefore not the one “who seizes a sleeping truth in order to proclaim it” but who “pronounces the interpretation that all truth functions to cover up.”⁵⁵

But how is such a position of an endless, authentic skeptic possible? How can change result from an analysis which is ultimately descriptive in nature? An engagement with Foucault’s own humanist question and the way he answers it by reframing two vital concept (*ideology* for dialectic materialism and *experience* for existentialist phenomenology) will put us into the position to understand the character of Foucault’s immanent critique and will finally allow us to illustrate it in light of the sixth Louvain lecture on the character of avowal in premodern and modern penal practices.

Reframing experience and ideology – Foucault’s answer to the humanist question

*“[Effective history] discovers the violence of a position that sides against those who are happy in their ignorance, against the effective illusions by which humanity protects itself, a position that encourages the dangers of research and delights in disturbing discoveries. The historical analysis of this rancorous will to knowledge reveals that all knowledge rests upon injustice (that there is no right, not even in the act of knowing, to truth or a foundation for truth) and that the instinct for knowledge is malicious (something murderous, opposed to the happiness of mankind).”*⁵⁶

In this passage, the meaning of “malicious” takes on yet another meaning. It distinguishes between good and bad murder and justifies, on this ground, why Foucault prefers Nietzsche over Kant. While Nietzsche’s doubly murderous gesture frees mankind, the murderous character of Kant’s empirical-transcendental doublet keeps mankind in a state of ignorance, wrapped up in illusions. This latter murderous movement is “opposed to the happiness of mankind.” Accordingly, the humanist question implied in this distinction can be phrased as follows: To what extent can human beings develop the kind of knowledge that contributes to the happiness of mankind? How can human beings, themselves in a state of ignorance, change the world into which they are thrown, which constitutes them in their beliefs and behaviors? The

53 Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 81.

54 Compare the sixth Louvain lecture in which Foucault says: “To show the paradoxes within the structure of avowal, its trap, I take as my guiding theme, rather paradoxically, what happened when the need for avowal was not satisfied or something escaped the procedure.” This guiding theme is constitutive of what I will discuss in the next section as “the experience on the edge” (Michel Foucault, “The Louvain Lectures: Truth Telling as Techniques of Domination,” *Lecture Nr. 6, May 20, 1981*, 10).

55 Foucault, “Nietzsche, Freud, Marx,” 276.

56 Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 95.

significance of this question for the Foucauldian project is best illustrated in relation to Althusser's and Sartre's positions on ideology and experience. I will first offer a Foucauldian reframing of ideology to then move, at the end of the paper, to his concept of "social experience." This investigation will give a clearer sense why Foucault is in a sense a Kantian humanist, inspired rather by the Enlightenment tradition than the tradition of humanism or anti-humanism.

While Althusser vacillates between ideology as a totality and ideologies as forms of false consciousness (a thickness not to be escaped from and a thinness so fragile to be unmaskable by science), Foucault persistently underlines that truth games "are [not] just concealed power relations."⁵⁷ Instead, power relations constitute truth games which then form historically hardened substances, material realities that position and subjectivize human activity. Most importantly, these substances are made of a fabric of power relations which itself is able to call the very substance into question. A problematization of these implicit power relations renders homogeneity ambiguous. The extent to which historically hardened substances are thick depends on the defense mechanisms these substances have worked out and worked over by their inherent power relations. Contrary to Althusser, Foucault thereby does not believe that thickness is dependent on the materialist ground of class contradictions as they manifest in historically specific time. In the sixth Louvain lecture on the paradoxical effects of avowal on early modern and modern penal theory and practice, Foucault also uses the term *dramaturgy* to illustrate his understanding of thickness. A drama, in this respect, is understood as "anything that brings forth the foundation and meaning of what is taking place."⁵⁸ If a specific substance is thick it is essential and functional for the maintenance of the truth game. In case its substance falls apart and cannot withhold itself from becoming an open, contradictory site it has to be replaced by new substances.⁵⁹ Thinness, on the other hand, does not relate to an illusion as false consciousness but to the knowledge *about* an illusion that comes with every truth game, the characteristic of which being that it can justify its own substance as an absolute manifestation which precedes interpretation.⁶⁰ Foucault gives an example of a reconceptualization of ideology in the sense of illusion in "Truth and Juridical Forms." Picturing capitalism as an ideology would mean to link specific truth games to the realization of the "employer's dream come true,"⁶¹ not only in industry but also throughout society.

"The factory, the school, the prison, or the hospitals have the object of binding

57 Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. James Faubion (New York: New Press, 1997), 297.

58 Foucault, *Lecture Nr. 6*, 9.

59 Compare *Ibid.*, in particular pages 9f., 24f.

60 For a Foucauldian account on thinness compare his understanding of man as being "no more than a kind of rift in the order of things" while he remains fully aware of the thickness specific modern practices of subjectivity carry. "Strangely enough, man (...) is probably no more than a kind of rift in the order of things, or, in any case, a configuration whose outlines are determined by the new position he has so recently taken up in the field of knowledge. (...) It is comforting, however, and a source of profound relief to think that man is only a recent invention, a figure not yet two centuries old, a new wrinkle in our knowledge, and that he will disappear again as soon as that knowledge has discovered a new form" (Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xxv).

61 Foucault, "Truth and Juridical Forms," 75.

the individual to a process of production, training, or correction of the producers. It's a matter of guaranteeing production, or the producers, in term of a particular norm."⁶²

On this basis, Foucault reinterprets ideology in a manner that remains truthful to his notion of freedom generated not outside of but within and through the contradictions and disparities of knowledge-power-struggles. In short, ideology can no longer be regarded as an obstacle (be it "epistemological" or "political") for the subject preventing her from truly realizing her essence as labor or as a member of a specific class. Rather, ideology forms subjects of knowledge and constitutes truth relations that are *real* for both workers and capitalists. They are real in the full sense of the term, part of a drama that cannot only be described in symbolic or performative idioms. Within this drama there is a significance and effectiveness at play that is ultimately transformative. It transforms the subject into a subject of capitalist production and reproduction. But since transformation produces the very substance of truth games, we cannot naturalize a specific essence or materialist grounds on which transformation takes place. "In order for men to be brought into labor, tied to labor, an operation is necessary, or a complex series of operations, by which men are effectively (...) bound to the production apparatus for which they labor."⁶³ While we can therefore say that Foucault agrees with Althusser's structural analysis of capitalist reproduction (looking for it outside the typical worker-capitalist relationship *and* integrating the function humanism can play respectively) he disagrees with the way Althusser remains beholden to the notion of false-consciousness and ideology as the grounds for truth.

Rather than positing a materialist grounds of class contradiction and thereby enlisting in a hermeneutic which "in effect falls back on a semiology" and "believes in the absolute existence of signs," Foucault wants to unravel the relation between substance and interpretation by showing the forms contradictions take *within* specific historical truth games. He therefore calls for a hermeneutic endeavor which pictures the organizational possibilities of paradoxes, problems and oppositions – how do they organize themselves within the signs of a truth game?⁶⁴ To Foucault, Marx, along with Nietzsche and Freud, has opened up this hermeneutic. Marxism, however, apparent in both Sartre and Althusser, "abandons the violence, the incompleteness, the infinity of interpretations in order to enthrone the terror of the index or to suspect language."⁶⁵ Foucault conceives of Marx as a thinker close to an *ethos* of limit and wonders whether Marx did not, in fact, illuminate "the density of the sign, (...) this open space, without end, (...) this space without real content or reconciliation" through a "play of negativity that the dialectic, at last, had unleashed by giving it a positive meaning."⁶⁶ Similarly in Foucault, we do not find language, truth or power to be suspect, for they first of all form historically hardened substances which can only be understood as positive. They form positive meanings which are rendered open and ambiguous through the investigation of the specific organization of their problems. The historically hardened

62 Ibid., 78.

63 Ibid., 86.

64 Compare Foucault, "Nietzsche, Freud, Marx," specifically 275-278.

65 Ibid., 278.

66 Ibid., 277.

substances are *positive* in the sense that they cannot be rejected. Since we form part of these positive substances and they constitute us, we cannot easily escape them. They imbue the present with effective meaning and significance.

Rather than thinking in terms of linear time Foucault is therefore interested in circular time. Rather than distinguishing “the ‘modern era’ from the ‘premodern’ or ‘postmodern,’” Foucault thinks “it would be more useful to try to find out how the attitude of modernity, ever since its formation, has found itself struggling with attitudes of ‘countermodernity.’”⁶⁷ In this light, Althusser’s anti-humanism is shown to be a rejection predicated on a modern notion of linear progress. He cannot understand history as a history of problems that are exchanged and substituted in circular moves. Neither can he understand that this perspective, most importantly, enriches the meanings of the present, for, in fact, any history for Foucault starts in the actuality of present problems to effectively—that is, through the investigation of historically different ways of living—disturb the ways they have been organized. These historical ways of living “cannot exactly be reactivated but at least constitute, or help to constitute, a certain point of view which can be very useful as a tool for analyzing what’s going on *now*—and to change it.”⁶⁸

Against this background, Foucault’s skepticism vis-à-vis *humanism* can be qualified more clearly. He does not so much reject the humanist question or interest; rather does he consider the concept unhelpful when it comes to a genealogical project. Foucault does not consider humanism a useful category of historical investigation. It is “too supple, too diverse, too inconsistent.”⁶⁹ Even more importantly, it is often confused with the category of enlightenment, which to Foucault is more productive. This confusion leads to an enforcement of humanist chimeras entirely wrapped up in the analytic of finitude. In other words, Foucault does not consider humanism to form a substance positive and thick enough to inspire a standpoint of effective critique of present problems. It can rather be understood in performative or symbolic ways, as reproducing the paradoxes we live in and constituting precise modifications of truth games while equally remaining not as effective as Kant’s *Critique* and Nietzsche’s response to form the decisive ethical substance to be worked on.

Yet, the ethical leverage of the humanist question is deeply embedded in Foucault’s critique of Althusser: There is no place for subjectivity in Althusser. He takes the death of man for granted and does not understand that Nietzsche does not formulate a solution, but rather poses a task which “requires work on our limits, that is, a patient labor giving form to our impatience for liberty.”⁷⁰ Although Nietzsche shows that any “origin lies at a place of inevitable loss” we are still bound to the analytic of finitude; we live it *positively* in all its thinness and thickness. The task is to get to the knowledge about man’s death, to dramatize it by way of bringing the “spark between the swords” on stage in a dramaturgically effective way. What maintains the play, where does it become weak? What is its dramaturgical substance, what is in danger to be lost. I argue that this double-layered structure of dramaturgical elements lies at the core of Foucault’s ethico-political enterprise. Since man is part of the ignorance he seeks to

67 Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment,” 39.

68 Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” 261 [emphasis added].

69 Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment,” 44.

70 *Ibid.*, 50.

dispel, he has to disappear himself. But how? Man can only disappear “as soon as that [other] knowledge has discovered *a new form*.”⁷¹ An *ethos* of limit applied to this problem leads Foucault to an integration of subjectivity, knowledge and power, on the one hand, and ethical and political substance on the other. Indeed, the different substances taken by the empirical-transcendental doublet need to be understood on two different levels of dramaturgy. An investigation of political substance exposes the dramaturgical functionality and significance with which specific paradoxes are organized within a truth game. In comparison, an investigation on the ethical substance understands the dramaturgical work that is needed in order to change present notions of subjectivity. These are two entirely different, though deeply implicated, levels of investigation. The first investigation asks about the points of diffraction, *when* do systems derail and *how* do they replace their substances. The second investigation locates “the material that’s going to be worked over by ethics,”⁷² the moralities involved to constitute specific subjectivities, specific relations between the self and oneself and asks *what* it is that needs to be changed.

In the sixth Louvain lecture, Foucault illustrates how we can conceptualize both investigations and their interrelation. An investigation of avowal in its *political*, dramaturgical substance would entail an understanding of the ways in which the practice of avowal moves from “a sort of contract of truth that (...) constituted a punitive engagement that gave meaning to the imposed sanction”⁷³ to the failure of this contract and attempts to supplement it through forms of hetero-veridiction such as psychological diagnoses.⁷⁴ Through this kind of analysis, Foucault gains a knowledge of historical problems, a knowledge about the ways the “question of subjectivity, of truth-telling of criminal subjectivity has been re-doubled and has extended its shadows over the simple question of avowal.”⁷⁵ In comparison, an investigation of avowal in its *ethical*, dramaturgical substance would entail an understanding of “appetite,” intensity and necessity of specific dramaturgical elements. Its question is primarily why the appetite for avowal is so big; which codes of morality are involved and have to become subject to change. Through this kind of analysis Foucault gains a knowledge about *the fact* that “the veridiction of the subject (...) provokes a crisis from which we have yet to escape.”⁷⁶ The harder it is to change a ethical practices, the more essential the specific ethical desiderata are for the judicial drama, the more vitally it is in need of an ethics that works on the subjectivities in play, the thicker is the *ethical* substance under investigation. Likewise, the more extensions of subjectivities within a specific substance are possible, the more its underlying politics can dramatize and juxtapose traps and expose the ways these traps have in turn been reintegrated into the judicial system, the thicker is the *political* substance under investigation.

These two levels of dramaturgy are illustrated in a second example. Foucault explains why he has turned to Greek aesthetics and philosophy with an explanation of political substance: “I wonder if our problem nowadays is not, in a way, similar to this one [in

71 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xv [emphasis added].

72 Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” 263.

73 Foucault, *Lecture Nr. 6*, 9.

74 *Ibid.*, 11ff.

75 *Ibid.*, 25.

76 *Ibid.*, 2.

ancient Greece], since most of us no longer believe that ethics is founded in religion, nor do we want a legal system to intervene in our moral, personal, private life.” In comparison, the ethical substance detected by him is the following: “Recent liberation movements suffer from the fact that they cannot find any principle on which to base the elaboration of a new ethics. They need an ethics, but they cannot find any other ethics than an ethics founded on so-called scientific knowledge of what the self is, what desire is, what the unconscious is, and so on.”⁷⁷ The ethical substance to be worked on is the scientific knowledge of what the self is. From the standpoint of this actuality, the problems and substances of ancient Greece can represent “a treasure of devices, techniques, ideas, procedures, and so on” which can be useful as tools for creative activity, that is the attempt to invent possibilities of how the relation one has to oneself can look like.

Yet again, and Foucault points this out himself, he does not prioritize the Greek way of living, the care of the self over modern ways of knowledge, nor does he seek to offer one specific alternative since “you can’t find the solution of a problem in the solution of another problem raised at another moment by other people.”⁷⁸ He rather wants to show “why ‘know thyself’ has obscured ‘take care of yourself’” to work on the ethical substance in place, that is “our morality, a morality of asceticism, [which] insists that the self is that which one can reject.”⁷⁹ Thus, ethical substance does not describe a specific normative content, it is normative *as such* and poses the question of alternatives without giving a clear solution. The ethical substance forms the necessity to work on specific normative concepts laid bare through an investigation of political substance. This enterprise involves the labor of systematic, homogeneous methodological inquiries in order to form an account of *effective history*. Thus, these inquiries are not contingent and ambiguous, “they have their practical coherence in the care brought to the process of putting historico-critical reflection to the test of concrete practices.”⁸⁰

Against the background of this reframing of ideology we can get a deeper sense of what Foucault means by “seeking to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom,” and understand that he engages in the meticulous study of history because he is not only interested in ambiguating meaning, a practice which remains on the symbolic and performative level. He wants to change effectively and incline the study of history to become cunning, critical, and curative.

I will end with one phenomenological reframing through which Foucault introduces a third dimension of dramaturgy. In contrast to Sartre who understands subjectivity as the authentic, subjective experience which founds absolute freedom, Foucault bends the concept of experience, with the help of Blanchot, Artaud and Bataille, to *social experience*. This different phenomenological reading of experience poses “the problem of experiences on the edge (...), borderline experiences which put into question what is usually considered acceptable.”⁸¹ These experiences mark what we already detected

77 Ibid., 255f.

78 Ibid., 256.

79 Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. James Faubion (New York: New Press, 1997), 228.

80 Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment,” 50.

81 Foucault, “What Our Present Is,” 132.

as the *guiding themes* of genealogical investigations. Their function is to unsettle, bring into play, disturb. Through them, the spark between the same and the other can be reconstructed and turned into a description of political and ethical substance which, in turn, sheds light on the contradictions that, before, had the possibility to organize themselves in the interior of the same. That borderline experiences are rather framed in terms of *social* than *individual* experience points precisely to the reason why Foucault is concerned about the substantive and dramaturgical and not the repressed and excluded. Indeed, in comparison to the common reading that Foucault attempts to liberate unheard voices to make them speak again, I argue that Foucault locates the ethical substance to be reworked amidst the social meaning these experiences carry with them. To be sure, it is only through their exteriority that we can get hold of dramaturgical elements in truth games which are thick enough to cause effective change. And maybe, for this purpose, the introduction of a hermeneutics of the self can form a vital tool. But Foucault does not opt for a specific way of life, be it the *parrhesiast* or the poet engaged in Kant's *Dichtkunst*. Foucault understands these practices as tools to ambiguate the social meaning which could be unmasked as a lie by borderline experiences. And thus it might be of interest to strive to become a *parrhesiast* and look for constraints and potentials in modern life. But this is not the thrust of Foucault's *ethos* of limit. Foucault is not interested in giving a prediction of the future, for it is "through many battles, many conflicts to respond to a certain number of problems, that specific solutions are chosen."⁸²

Foucault cares about the *real* possibility of changing the same through the exteriority of the other which leads him to invoke a third meaning of dramaturgy.

"History becomes 'effective' to the degree that it introduces discontinuity into our very being—as it *divides our emotions, dramatizes our instincts, multiplies our body and sets it against itself*. (...) It easily seizes the slow elaboration of instincts and those movements where, in turning upon themselves, they relentlessly set about their self-destruction."⁸³

In order to successfully dramatize our subjective experiences and introduce discontinuity into our social being and thereby answer the humanist question Foucault raises, he emphasizes the political and ethical substance of enlightenment which he finds in Kant's *Critique* and not in a reconceptualization of the humanism proposed by Sartre or Merleau-Ponty. Indeed, he is convinced that his social critical enterprise "still entails faith in Enlightenment."⁸⁴ The ethical substance of the enlightenment understands that we cannot choose to be part of it, "either accept it or escape from it, rather: we are beings who are historically determined, to a certain extent, by the enlightenment."⁸⁵ The political substance locates a possibility of transgression of the enlightenment in a continuous criticism at its frontiers, in turning the idea of *Critique*, which starts from the necessary and incorporates the excluded, into a critique which starts from the limits and reworks the same.

82 Foucault, "What Our Present Is," 139.

83 Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 87f. [emphasis added].

84 Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment," 50.

85 *Ibid.*, 43.

In contrast to the privilege Sartre and Althusser give their own body of knowledge and with a skeptical eye on the dangers of humanist substances, we can conclude that Foucault answers the humanist question with a turn to the enlightenment. As a consequence, he even questions the common notion of theory, doctrine or knowledge for his own practice. What matters to him is a standpoint of freedom which informs creative activity and dramatizes what we have in light of what could be. To be successful and bear effective stakes, such an immanent critique of the present “has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.”⁸⁶ Secondly, Foucault’s social critique needs work. Indeed, it has “its generality, its systematicity, its homogeneity, and its stakes” and it can have these only when it puts “itself to the test of reality, of contemporary reality, both to grasp the points where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take.”⁸⁷ An ethico-political choice is therefore not for or against a specific solution, form of life or ethics, it is the “choice we have to make every day to determine which is the main danger,”⁸⁸ which carries the main substance that keeps us bound to the ignorance of mankind. ■

86 Ibid., 50.

87 Ibid., 47; 46.

88 Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” 256.

