“HOW IS IT, THEN, THAT WE STILL REMAIN BARBARIANS?”
Foucault, Schiller, and the Aestheticization of Ethics

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The wholesale aestheticization of society had found its grotesque apotheosis for a brief moment in fascism, with its panoply of myths, symbols, and orgiastic spectacles. But in the post-war years a different form of aestheticization was also to saturate the entire culture of late capitalism, with its fetishism of style and surface, its culture of hedonism and technique, its reifying of the signifier and displacement of discursive meaning with random intensities.

—Terry Eagleton,
The Ideology of the Aesthetic

AESTHETICS AND ETHICS

Eagleton enunciates a widely held view. But what is meant here by “aestheticization”? What conception of the aesthetic is invoked? And what binds the chain of associations that leads from aesthetics to fascism, and then to fetishism, hedonism, and meaninglessness? How, in short, has aesthetics come to be the other to ethics? In another text, Eagleton suggests why aesthetics has been morally suspect from the very start: “Aesthetics is born in the mid-eighteenth century as a discourse of the body”; it concerned itself “with all that which follows from our sensuous relation to the world, . . . with the way reality strikes the body on its sensory surface.” Is the slide from aesthetics to nihilism greased with bodily secretions?

In this essay, I explore the relationship between aesthetics and ethics by examining the charge of “aestheticization” as it has been leveled against

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Foucault by Eagleton and others. I do so in some small part to defend Foucault, but more important, to make a case for the indispensability of the aesthetic to ethics. Certain forms of the aesthetic do pose ethical dangers, but the very possibility of enacting worthy ethical ideals depends upon cultivation of an aesthetic sensibility.

Like Eagleton, I too inflect aesthetics as a discourse of a sensuous, responsive body. But I am wary of Eagleton's juxtaposition of the body to a reality that "strikes" it. In figuring the body as a reactive receptor, Eagleton's formulation tends to obscure how the body can itself be inflected artistically— the body too can strike as a black mood or with purple prose; as a whistle or a hymn; as flashing eyes, tapping feet, or embroidered tales. And, more important for my thesis, by figuring bodily responsiveness as automatic or involuntary in function, as reflex, Eagleton's formulation obscures the possibility of an experimentally cultivated responsiveness.

When Eagleton or, as we shall see, Richard Wolin or Christopher Norris or Alex Callinicos accuse Foucault of "aestheticization," they tend to imagine aesthetics as the province of a reactive, undisciplined sensuality. To allow this aesthetics to mingle with ethical and political life is to whet the appetite and impair thoughtfulness, or, at least, it is to confine ethics and politics to their spectacular, rhetorical, and dramatic dimensions.

It seems to me, however, that Eagleton et al. overlook/underfeel a third term between a striking reality and a stricken body. I'll call this third term sensibility: the quality or character of sensuous experience, a character that is culturally encoded and temperamentally delimited, but also educable (to some degree) through careful techniques of the self. A sensibility is a disciplined form of sensuousness. This aesthetics—aesthetics as sensibility—formation—has implications for ethics that are irreducible to fascism, hedonism, or indiscriminateness. For as a form of askesis, a sensibility establishes the range of possibility in perception, enactment, and responsiveness to others.

The connection between aesthetics and ethics, then, depends upon how aesthetics is figured. It depends equally upon the model of ethics employed. My point of departure here is Friedrich Schiller. In On the Aesthetic Education of Man (1794), Schiller ponders the disturbing coexistence of rational enlightenment and ethical barbarism: if "our age is Enlightened; that is to say, such knowledge has been discovered and publicly disseminated as would suffice to correct . . our practical principles," and if "the spirit of free inquiry has . . undermined the foundations upon which fanaticism and deception had raised their throne," "how is it, then, that we still remain barbarians?"

Schiller concludes that reason is ethically insufficient. Ethics requires not only rational principles of behavior but the perceptual refinement to apply them to particular cases and the disposition or will to live them out. For
Schiller, that will is an aesthetic product, to be cultivated by disciplining and refining one’s sensitivity to beauty. Schiller’s central claim is that ethics is not solely a matter of a code (criteria set out in advance of behavior to guide and judge it), but also requires a sensuously engaged responsiveness to others. This ethico-aesthetic sensibility is more crafted than uncovered, and its cultivation is at least as crucial to ethics as are principles, reasons, and their assemblage into a moral code. Although they diverge on many other issues, Schiller and Foucault on this point agree.

Also a partial critic of Enlightenment, Foucault too finds “code morality” insufficient:

In short, for an action to be “moral,” it must not be reducible to an act or a series of acts conforming to a rule, a law, or a value. There is no moral conduct that does not [also] call for the forming of oneself as an ethical subject; and no forming of the ethical subject without “modes of subjectivation” and an “ascetics” or “practices of the self” that support them.

In The Use of Pleasure Foucault examines one historical site where great attention was paid to these latter ethical tasks. Whereas today “the main emphasis is placed on the [ethical] code, on its systematicity, its richness, its capacity to adjust to every possible case,” in Greek and Greco-Roman antiquity “the strong and dynamic [ethical] element is to be sought in the forms of subjectivation and the practices of the self.” In the latter model “the necessity of respecting the law and the customs—the nomoi—was very often underscored, [but] more important than the content of the law and its conditions of application was the attitude that caused one to respect them.” The real challenge, then, is to “keep in mind the distinction between the code elements of a morality and the elements of ascesis, neglecting neither their coexistence, their interrelations, their relative autonomy, nor their possible differences of emphasis.”

Foucault construes the self “as an object of a complex and difficult elaboration”; “technologies of the self” are the means through which humans effect “a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.” These formulations exhibit a precise ambiguity with regard to the question of who or what is directing these “elaborations” and “operations” and what ends they serve. Is the transformation of self a matter of socially imposed normalization? Or are techniques “of” the self normalizing pressures internalized by the self and applied to itself? Or do such technologies afford opportunities for reflective modification of the self by the self?
Foucault suggests that it is impossible to discern exactly the relative weights of these three in the formation of any given self. Foucault’s early work accentuated the first two modalities of self-formation. The discussion in *Discipline and Punish* of “bio-power,” for example, sensitized readers to disciplinary practices, like Schiller’s “aesthetic education,” which write the law right into the body. But Foucault’s later work also affirms a project of aesthetic inscription: sensibility appears as susceptible, to some uncertain degree, to self-conscious craft. Here Foucault foregrounds the last modality of self-formation, that is, the reflective modification of the self by the self. If the point of his early genealogies was to expose the project of individuality as a ruse of power and to disrupt our association of self-discipline with freedom, the point of his later work is to enunciate the more complex thesis that there is no self without discipline, no discipline that does not also harbor opportunities for artistic practice, and no ethics without aesthetics. A moment of “freedom” survives within subjectivity after all, it seems.

But what kind of “freedom” can coexist with ubiquitous, productive power? Foucaultian freedom is surely not the Kantian idea of an autonomous rational will, and neither is it Schiller’s romantic revision of Kant wherein an aesthetic modulation of the psyche allows the rational will to engage. Like Schiller, Foucault refuses to reduce ethics to a matter of reason, but unlike Schiller, Foucault proceeds further to pluralize the notion of “reason”.

I think that the central issue of philosophy and critical thought since the eighteenth century has been, still is, and will, I hope, remain the question, *What is the Reason that we use? What are its historical effects? What are its limits, and what are its dangers?*

Foucault resignifies freedom by locating it in relation to a historically situated rationality. He thereby refuses to define freedom in opposition to a system of external constraints: his is a heteronomous freedom. A subject can indeed experience “freedom”—can feel the exhilaration of making a distinctive mark upon what one comes to be. But this liberatory self-naming is not to be construed as a transcendence of power. It consists, rather, in tentative explorations of the outer edges of the current regime of subjectivity. These engagements with the frontier foreground the possibility of new configurations of and for identity. But these novelities are still a function of the institutional matrix that helps to define them, they still are implicated in historically contingent practices of power, and they still contend with a recalcitrant body that is never entirely reducible to any practice of subjectivity.

Foucault dissents from Schiller on reason and on autonomy, but he draws from him fragments of faith in the transformative capacity of romantic ideals. Foucault acknowledges that the very experience of freedom depends, again
to some uncertain degree, upon the ardent wish for individualized self-direction, upon the dream of a beautifully designed subjectivity. Such efficacious fictions help to make the freedom there is to be had havable.¹⁹

In sum, Eagleton is right that the aesthetic “marks the way in which structures of power . become gradually transmuted into structures of feeling.”²⁰ But I would add that this transmutation is also susceptible to reflective, experimental, counter-hegemonic forces. Or such is my wager as I explore with Foucault the intersection of aesthetics and ethics.

Eagleton et al., wary of this intersection, fear it to be the place where violence and beauty conjoin. And the aestheticization of violence is indeed a risk—to use an American example instead of the German one, the Pentagon has presented annihilating weapons as sublime mushroom clouds against a desert sky, as a meteor shower of lights over Baghdad, as a sleek and elegant stealth bomber-bird. But why react to the aestheticization of violence with an attempt to eradicate the aesthetic dimension of ethics (or politics)? Such a project is itself morally risky. It may also be self-defeating, for what if the very possibility of enacting worthy ideals depends upon cultivation of an aesthetic sensibility⁹

In what follows, I pursue this possibility by examining in detail the various modalities of the charge of “aestheticization.” Much turns upon the conceptions of aesthetics and ethics first presupposed by the critics and then mistakenly invested in Foucault. This investment allows them to find Foucault deficient according to standards he contests. It also retards more productive engagements between contending models of ethics and aesthetics.

THE CASE AGAINST AESTHETICIZATION

Mixing the Three Realms

Richard Wolin begins his critique by invoking a Habermasian division of experience into three spheres or realms. There is science, morality, and art, each of which is independent and mutually exclusive of the others.²¹ Eagleton speaks of the cognitive, ethico-political, and libidinal-aesthetic; Christopher Norris describes domains of “truth-seeking rational enquiry,” “ethico-political discourse,” and “aesthetic values.”²² From within such schemas, Foucault appears as an aesthetic imperialist, a would-be colonizer of the other two spheres. Foucault, writes Wolin, is a “pan-aestheticist” who “refuses to rest content with aestheticism qua transcendent, supramundane spiritual activity,” insisting instead that “the concern for beauty evinced in the artistic sphere
must be generalized throughout life.” Foucault here follows Nietzsche, for whom “the aesthetic attitude toward the world must transgress the boundaries of the aesthetic sphere per se, and pursue a course of conscious world-mastery.” Nietzsche “refuses to respect the separate ‘inner logics’ in differentiated realms of human cognition.”

More generous than Wolin, Eagleton reads Foucault’s aestheticism as a misguided response to the modern eclipse of harmony among the spheres rather than as the expression of his personal will to power. But Eagleton agrees that the aesthetic can “interrelate” the spheres only by “swallowing up the other two. Everything should now become aesthetic. Truth, the cognitive, becomes that which satisfies the mind. . . Morality is converted to a matter of style [of] turning oneself into an artifact.”

For Wolin, Norris, and Eagleton, the aesthetic is an autonomous “realm” whose criteria of value are nonrational, amoral, and apolitical matters of beauty and style. Ethics and politics are aestheticized: the verb form is to evoke a kind of sci-fi inhabitation of the body by an alien and only apparently innocuous force. Indeed, if there exist distinct domains of human interest, each with distinct logics and hierarchies of values, then Foucault’s concern with care of the self must be an aggressive universalization of the partial truths of one sphere. But that “if” is precisely one of the issues between them and Foucault that is suppressed by their redescnptions of his project.

What Foucault describes as processes of “subjectivation” or “ascesis” or “technologies of the self” are here presented as merely “aesthetic”—that is, concerning a pleasing, sensuous, and superficial style or appearance—rather than seriously “ethical.” For such critics, ethics is a matter of identifying and justifying a code of behavior; it is a matter of the other two spheres (the cognitive and the ethico-political) engaging in a complex but mutually “respectful” interaction. These critics do not recognize Foucault’s heterodox conception of ethics as an ethics, but see it rather as a pan-aesthetic attempt to eliminate the practice of ethics. They do so despite Foucault’s clear statements that he understands ethics to include questions about the code: “I had to keep in mind the distinction between the code elements of a morality and the elements of ascesis, neglecting neither their coexistence, their interrelations, their relative autonomy, nor their possible differences of emphasis. . . I am not supposing that the codes are unimportant.”

The Micropolitics of Monads

Stephen Best and Douglas Kellner place their objections to aestheticization in a slightly different frame, more Marxist than Habermasian. For them,
the aesthetic turn in ethics is a feeble response to the cultural condition of capitalist colonization. Those like Foucault—who have rejected “traditional rationalist politics based on ideology critique, the overcoming of false consciousness, the subordination of art to politics, and a pragmatic concern with the serious business of seizing power”—can respond to the fact that we are “libidinally bound” to capitalism only by analyzing the structure of desire. Having banished themselves from the politics of reason, pragmatics, and seizure, they seek refuge in a “micropolitics of desire.”

But such an “aesthetic”—that is, concerning sensual images that while superficial are also powerful and seductive—response to capitalist hegemony has, say Best and Kellner, no counter-hegemonic force. Its focus on individually desiring subjects deflects attention from the shared economic and social conditions of colonization, the very conditions that must be the target of collective reformation. Alex Callinicos, in Against Postmodernism, concurs:

Foucault asks why “everyone’s life couldn’t become a work of art?” The answer, of course, is that most people’s lives are still... shaped by their lack of access to productive resources and their consequent need to sell their labour-power in order to live. To invite a hospital porter in Birmingham, a car-worker in São Paolo, a social security clerk in Chicago, or a street child in Bombay to make a work of art of their lives would be an insult—unless linked to precisely the kind of strategy for global social change which... poststructuralism rejects.

Callinicos has a point about the prospects for universalizing an aesthetics of existence. But Callinicos himself fails to offer a viable “strategy for global social change.” Moreover, I am not confident he is sufficiently responsive to the impositions and violences that would be engendered by such an ambitious project. These points help to explain why Foucault brackets economic, occupational, and class considerations from his discussions of arts of the self:

In fact we know from experience that the claim to escape from the system of contemporary reality has led only to the return of the most dangerous traditions. I prefer the very specific transformations that have proved to be possible in the last twenty years in a certain number of areas that concern our ways of being and thinking, relations to authority, relations between the sexes, the way in which we perceive insanity or illness; I prefer even these partial transformations to the programs for a new man that the worst political systems have repeated throughout the twentieth century.

Foucault also eschews the language of political economy because he does not think that freedom is something that can be guaranteed by a favorable set of material conditions—“I do not think that there is anything that is functionally—by its very nature—absolutely liberating. Liberty is a practice.”
But this is not to say, continues Foucault, that "one may as well leave people in slums thinking that they can simply exercise their rights there."29

Does Foucault grant the ethical necessity of working to reduce slums and economic inequality, without making this project the central object of his own theoretical concern? Is this because he believes that the means to combat social and economic injustice are obvious and that what is lacking is the aesthetic-ethical-political will to employ them? Foucault says little that responds explicitly to these questions. And, Simons points out, by the terms of his own philosophy, Foucault should have offered an "analysis of the enmeshment of art in power relations."30

For Foucault's materialist critics,31 a critical response to the capitalist capture of our very identities, desires, and lived experiences—a capture that itself can be described as an aestheticization of politics—is surely not more aestheticization! It must involve, rather, a "politics of alliances" and "coalition building."32 That kind of politics, however, is ruled out by Foucault and friends who have abandoned hope of ever motivating action under a common banner like "anti-capitalism." Eagleton describes this abandonment as the Foucaultian return to "monadism": "Foucault's vigorously self-mastering individual remains wholly monadic. Society is just an assemblage of autonomous self-disciplining agents, with no sense that their self-realization might flourish within bonds of mutuality."33

There are two elements in this charge: first, Foucault's "monadic" conception of the self and, second, his failure to recognize an internal connection between self-realization, mutuality, and public or collective action. The first claim is odd, given Foucault's insistence on the impossibility of being outside a regime of power, which functions as the condition of possibility of any form of subjectivity and which always fails to achieve its goal of preventing intersubjective bonds likely to disrupt the regime. The goal of Foucault's "aesthetics of existence" is to shape oneself to the extent made possible within this web of constraints (of social, historical, economic, and temperamental-bodily circumstance). It is a matter "of showing how social mechanisms have been able to work, how forms of repression and constraint have acted, and then, starting from there, it seems to me, one [leaves] . . . to the people themselves, knowing all the above, the frontier possibility of self-determination."34 There is no escaping a regime of power, but this does not mean that subjectivation is simply subjection, for there is always the possibility of "practices of liberation, of freedom, as in Antiquity, starting of course from a certain number of rules, styles and conventions that are found in the culture."35

With regard to the second element in Eagleton's charge, Eagleton is right to note that Foucault rejects the idea of "self-realization within bonds of
mutuality.” But it is the “self-realization” not the “bonds of mutuality” part with which he takes issue. Foucault does not share an Aristotelian notion of politics or public discourse as the privileged site of self-realization. He find this quest for self-realization to be indulgent and implicated in otherwise unnecessary political violences. But this does not mean that Foucault’s aesthetic self cannot engage in collective practices of mobilization for reasons other than self-realization. An “aesthetics of existence” can be one of the means through which we improve the quality and generosity of our connectedness to others.

Many of Foucault’s critics seem to want to own the discourse of mutuality, coalition, political resistance, and maternal conditions, exiling any theorist who breaks with their specific conceptions to the land of individualism, monadism, complacency, and style. Even Eagleton, who is alert to the ethics-aesthetics link in others, fails to acknowledge it sufficiently in Foucault. He instead identifies Foucault’s aestheticism with fantasy, free play, and the escapist dreams of beautiful souls. Foucault’s aesthetics of existence expresses, according to Eagleton, a yearning for a life “blessedly free from the shackles of truth, meaning and sociality.” For a “giddy” and “apocalyptic” moment Foucault allows himself to “fantasize” about “what it would be like to be emancipated from institutionality altogether.” This aesthetic dimension of Foucault’s psyche coexists, continues Eagleton, with a more analytical, realist element. This latter is responsible for Foucault’s theory of power as pervasive and as productive of subjectivity. Thus while Foucault dreams of pure, negative liberty, he doesn’t ever believe “that human life could ever be anything other than institutional life.” Eagleton concludes that it is this combination of escapist fantasy and extremely pessimistic realism that allows Foucault to excuse himself from the obligation to work macro-politically.

**Heteronomy and Hedonism**

Related to the criticism that Foucault’s aesthetics of existence is individualistic is the claim that he construes the individual as a peculiarly inefficacious entity, reducing subjectivity from “a multi-dimensional form of agency and praxis” to a decentred desiring existence. Such a self is incapable of “autonomy,” or willing on the basis of a rational principle one gives to oneself. Foucault does indeed fail to practice ethics in this way, rejecting the model of ethics as the will’s obedience to a command or “imperious injunction” of Reason, Nature, or God. For Foucault an ethic based on obedience to a command is not viable, for the morality of that command, not to mention its existence, can never be established. Moreover, a command morality is
very likely to be blunt, harsh, inattentive to the complexities of context, timing, and political possibilities. Ethics is for Foucault a matter of reflective heteronomy, of the recognition of one’s implication in and dependence upon a web of social relations within which there nevertheless remains room for the individual to carve out a space of distinction, self-direction, or “liberty.”

Surely Best, Kellner, Wolin, and Eagleton have encountered similar misgivings about morality as command. Why, then, do they invoke this model in their critiques as if it were an unproblematic alternative? Perhaps it is because they prefer the problems and dangers accompanying a command morality to those carried by Foucault’s ethics of reflective heteronomy. One of these latter is hedonism. Inside the charge of a threat to “autonomy” one can hear the concern that Foucault’s micropolitics of desire—which after all posits desire as a fundamental unit of analysis and powerful force in political life—will subject us not to Reason but to the body and its pleasures. In describing the self as decentered, Foucault is sanctioning a life of unregulated bodily impulses. Wolin makes this link between the defense of a neo-Kantian ethic and a fear of the tyrannical body explicit. Within Foucault’s aestheticism is a morally suspect “vitalism”:

“Art reminds us of states of animal vigor,” Nietzsche announces. “Becoming more beautiful as the expression of a victorious will!” he gushes elsewhere—in a spirit that is not at all foreign to the sublimated vitalism Foucault endorses.

If Foucaultian aestheticizers are “gushing” according to Wolin, they are naked according to Best and Kellner: Foucault “strips the subject of moral responsibility and autonomy.” Foucaultian aestheticization, then, signifies bondage to the body, its cravings, emissions, and obsessions. Foucaultian aesthetics is a dangerous discourse of the body; “it concerns itself with all that follows from our sensuous relation to the world, and from that which takes root in the guts and the gaze, with the way reality strikes the body on its sensory surface.” Here Foucault’s project of crafting a sensibility is reduced to an unreflective submission to the body. Foucault’s aesthetics is thus stripped of its ascesis.

_Theatricality_

Wolin also associates Foucault’s aestheticism with dandyism. Again making the charge of pan-aestheticism, Wolin argues that Foucault replaces the interest in collective action, rational consensus, and social justice with a preference for the beautiful, the sublime, and the tasteful. But “taste” cannot
distinguish—or distinguish only arbitrarily—between true and false consciousness, just and unjust orders.45 According to Wolin, Foucault claims that "normative questions cannot be adjudicated rationally." (Foucault may say that he is "fortunately committed to practicing a rationality,"46 but Wolin hears in Foucault's writing the conviction that "the Enlightenment project of rational reflection...is not worth saving."47) Thus, ethical judgment can for Foucault consist in no more than a willful choice among his fancies.

This is not a rational choice but neither is it random, continues Wolin, for there are criteria of value internal to the aesthetic realm. But they concern not the content of the choice but its dramatic effect. In rejecting a code-based ethic, in particular the one centering around the principle of "respect for all rational nature as ends-in-themselves," Foucault is left with "a dramaturgical model of conduct, in which action becomes meaningful solely qua performative gesture."48 Foucault's ethic is grounded upon what Schiller himself called "uncultivated taste," that is, a taste that "seizes upon what is new and startling—on the colourful, fantastic, and bizarre, the violent and the savage. It fashions grotesque shapes, loves swift transitions, exuberant forms, glaring contrasts, garish lights, and song full of feeling."49 Thus, in Foucault's ethic—and this is Wolin's point—others become mere means, "material for my own personal aesthetic gratification; they are degraded to the status of bit players in the drama of my own private aesthetic spectacle."50

Once "provocative actions, gestures or spectacles" are deemed to be the telos of Foucaultian aesthetics, it follows that his "ethical universe...is a Hobbesian state of nature with a flair for style."51 But Wolin need not define Foucaultian ethics thus. Even leaving aside Foucault's affirmation of the necessity of a code, subjectivation has more to do with "asceticism"—with self-discipline, self-restraint—than with style as performance, which after all is only one of a wide variety of possible techniques of the self that a Foucaultian ethics might employ. Moreover, Foucault also displays admiration for the Greco-Roman ideal of a well-balanced self, an artistic arrangement of its parts. Is this too garish, whorish, girlish, or frivolous? Here Foucault follows another Nietzsche, the one who said:

One thing is needful.—To "give style" to one's character—a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye. Here a large mass of second nature has been added; there a piece of original nature has been removed—both times through long practice and daily work at it. Here the ugly that could not be removed is concealed; there it has been reinterpreted and made sublime. Much that is vague and resisted shaping has been saved and exploited for distance views; it is meant to beckon toward the far and immeasurable.52
Veiling Violence

The final element in the case against Foucault concerns his construing of power as, in Eagleton's words, a "self-grounding, self-generative and self-delighting" artifact. This presentation aestheticizes away the pain and suffering involved in power. According to Eagleton, Foucault becomes "entranced by the organicism of this splendid aesthetic construct, as when he comments on power as 'an extremely complex system of relations, which leads one finally to wonder how, given that no one person can have conceived it in its entirety, it can be so subtle in its distribution, its mechanisms, reciprocal controls and adjustments.' "53 Eagleton here makes the Schillerian assumption that the motivational power of the aesthetic depends upon its ability to simulate, in the self or in the appearance of the art-object, a kind of harmony: Foucault gets carried away with the organicism of (his own construct of) power. Under this spell, the "brutal violence"54 of a regime of power fades from his view, enabling Foucault's "latent preference for a power which is evident rather than covert," a preference that brings him to the edge of endorsing torture and "absolutist coercion" over incarceration and "insidious techniques of subjection."55 Because "splendid artifacts" dazzle, Foucault too often forgets that they harm.56 Eagleton makes an interesting argument here. He uses "the aesthetic" in the sense of a realm of false appearance, of veils used to prettify the ugly truths they conceal, and he assumes that their veils work best when they are organic wholes, "non-instrumental, non-teleological, autonomous, and self-referential" artifacts. Eagleton has put his finger on the central dilemma facing attempts to affirm the intersection of ethics and aesthetics: the aesthetic is both ethically indispensable (it provides an impetus to act well) and morally dangerous (it can cloak brutality, cruelty, and inhumanity in beautiful and seductive forms).57

Eagleton takes his critique of Foucault's artifactual conception of power a step further when he claims that Foucault links the exercise of power to the pleasure of artistic self-expression. This linking functions as a kind of endorsement of it. Although Eagleton identifies the crime here as a "profoundly ambivalent" attitude toward power—the productivity of power "is in one sense oppressive, generating ever more refined techniques of subjection and surveillance, but it is productive in a rather more positive or creative sense too, a triumphant Nietzschean growth, unfolding and proliferation"58—what seems to trouble Eagleton most is the effect upon social behavior of Foucault's highlighting of the tie between power and pleasure. Foucault cannot be blamed for the fact that it is possible to take pleasure in exercising power over others, but Eagleton does hold him accountable for advertising the link, glamorizing it, and thus enabling the dangerously amoral
will-to-power to draw upon the “resolute will and ardour” of the body. I shall return to the question of aesthetics and violence below.

THE POSITIVE ROLE OF ARTISTRY IN ETHICS

What has caused the most alarm about Foucault’s entrance into the discourse of ethics is his refusal to place the moral “code”—a “prescriptive ensemble” of values, rules of action, and criteria of judgment—at the center of ethics. Instead, Foucault focuses upon the “manner in which one ought to form oneself as an ethical subject acting in reference to the prescriptive elements that make up the code,” upon the processes through which one might become the moral subject of one’s own actions. Why this focus? Because here he and Schiller concur against Wolin and Eagleton, who fail to attend to the persistence of barbarism in an age of reason.

Ethics, according to Foucault, is the intertwining of code and subjectivation. Subjectivation is a complex process, both in terms of agency and in terms of the tasks it must perform. Agency: subjectivation proceeds via cultural hegemony as well as by means of individual manipulations of and machinations within cultural limits. This is what I refer to as Foucault’s ethic of heteronomy: moral action is heteronomous both with regard to the web of social, legal, institutional, and other cultural constraints or regimes of power and with regard to the recalcitrant materials within the “individual” body, for example, desires, fears, the process of aging. Tasks: subjectivation serves several functions. First, it must specify which part of the self (behavior, dreams, secret thoughts?) is particularly salient for ethics; second, it must determine which exercises and litanies are to install the ethical code upon the body as a sensibility; third, it must generate a rationale for obedience to ethical disciplines and principles; and fourth, it must designate a telos for the ethical subject.

Foucault chose to be reticent about the “telos” he endorsed and about the content of the code that is to work together with it:

The role of an intellectual is not to tell others what they must do. By what right would he do so? And remember all the prophecies, promises, injunctions and plans intellectuals have been able to formulate in the course of the last two centuries and of which we have seen the effects.

Because of this he left himself open to charges like the one Eagleton makes: “Does it all come down to a question of how one ‘stylizes’ one’s conduct? What would a stylish rape look like, precisely?” Although this objection
again reads Foucault's emphasis on the subjection dimension of ethics as a repudiation of all need for a code, and it ignores his explicit repudiation of rape, would it have been better for Foucault to have filled out his heterodox and heteronomous conception of ethics with a specific content, and to offer it up for debate? I think so, even if one then courts another danger, that of universalizing ideals that are class or race or gender specific or of engaging in a morally suspect projection of one's self onto another.

Thoreau is for me exemplary here. It is not that he provides in advance a set of criteria to determine which "ethical substances," "ascetic techniques," "modes of subjection," and "ethical teloses" are acceptable and which are not. Rather, he affirms both a particular code and specific forms of asceticism, sometimes emphasizing one of them, sometimes the other, in the hope that the combination will resonate with his readers' predispositions, including the capacity for care and reasoned persuasion. And Thoreau repeatedly juxtaposes his ethos with rival "modulations of the psyche" and with alternative codes.\(^66\)

I also agree with Foucault's critics that an artistic approach to ethics should include a self-critical analysis of the relation between power and aesthetics. The project of using an "aesthetic" sensibility to oppose the barbarism of American life might here draw upon the Frankfort school insight that labor too is a technique of self, and acknowledge warnings about the commodity fetishism lurking in the shadows of the aesthetic gaze.\(^67\)

But I agree with Foucault when he says that while he used an aesthetic vocabulary, a project such as his could with justice be discussed under the rubric of moral philosophy.\(^68\) For like the law or code dimension of ethics, the processes of subjection concern the restriction or governance of behavior. The difference is that techniques of subjection respond to subtle norms of admirable behavior and thought; they address the question of which sensibilities, attitudes, or characters, and not simply which actions, are most laudable. It might even be said that the former concerns make for a more resilient and careful approach to ethics. For codes are always crude things, and much behavior of ethical significance—that is, with the potential to cause suffering—slips between its cracks. "What struck me about Antiquity," says Foucault, "is that the points around which reflection is most active regarding sexual pleasure are not at all the points which represented the traditionally received forms of prohibition. On the contrary, it was where sexuality was the least restricted that the moralists of antiquity questioned themselves with the most intensity and where they succeeded in formulating the most rigorous doctrines."\(^69\)

But if one is interested in ethics and morality, why choose to speak of "aesthetics"? What is the value of representing ethics in the language of art?
I can name two such advantages, especially if one uses the plastic arts as the model, rather than the visual-voyeuristic model typically invoked by political critics of the aesthetic. First, the constructed character of moral agents and principles comes to the fore as they are likened to pieces of work like sculptures, carvings, pottery, to things worked and reworked in ways never free from the mark or force of prior embodiments, intentions, or accidents. Second, insofar as “art” is thought to call for a special mode of perception, that is, an attention to things as sensuous ensembles (scenes, songs, stories, dances), an artistic representation of ethics may reveal with special force its structural or network character.

Why do so many of his critics nevertheless reduce Foucaultian ethics to pan-aestheticization, or monadism, or a willful hedonism, or shock art violence? Because, I think, their arguments are based on the underargued presumption that if one does not endorse a “command” ethics one has no ethics at all. Only a code-centered model can ensure a care for others, limiting “provocative actions, gestures or spectacles” in the name of some categorical imperative. They acknowledge some value for the aesthetic but not in the sphere of reason, ethics, or politics. The attempt to ban aesthetic from these spheres is based on a fear that not to do so would open a Pandora’s box of opportunities for manipulation and propaganda. This is a reasonable fear, not only given the phenomena of fascist and totalitarian art but also considering disturbing trends in campaign and commercial advertising.

The aesthetic dimension of ethics is clearly susceptible to misuse. So is the commitment to rationality or to the scientific method or to the exercise of authority. The first question, though, is whether the aesthetic disposition is ethically dispensable. To state the hypothesis boldly: code-only moralities have lost their hold on many people today, and thus in search of an audience, they are devolving into fundamentalisms of purity and self-certainty—and hatred and violence against nonbelievers. “The idea of a morality as obedience to a code of rules is now disappearing, has already disappeared. To this absence of a morality, one responds, or must respond, with a research which is that of an aesthetics of existence.”

Regardless of whether or not Foucault himself did so, his artistry can be used as part of a project to cultivate a care for the world not conditioned on the fact that the world be legible to us. Foucault did believe that the arts of the self, serving different ends in different ethics, form a constitutive dimension of any morality. Foucault presses critics of “aestheticization” to acknowledge how the perspective they endorse needs the aesthetic element they want to expunge, he critically examines the model of ethics as a code, and he asks us to think again about the relation of rationality to barbarism.

2. Martin Jay is right to insist that any discussion of aestheticization “must begin by identifying the normative notion of the aesthetic it presupposes” (p. 72). Jay’s own survey of different uses of the term is useful, although it does not include the sense in which I use it, that is, the aesthetic-as-sensibility-formation. See Martin Jay, *Force Fields* (London: Routledge, 1993).


6. Schiller’s argument, in brief, goes like this: An aesthetic mood can arise in the presence of a beautiful, inanimate object in Nature. What is beautiful about such an object is the singularity of its thereness. As one becomes practiced in experiencing natural objects in their unique specificity, one in turn becomes more competent at recognizing other selves for their own sake. Thus, the characteristic quality of the self under the sway of the aesthetic mood is an appreciation of the freedom, that is, self-determining potential, of others.

While I am enchanted by Schiller’s account of the mutual dependence of respect for persons and aesthetic sensibility, when I shake my head and blink my eyes I remember how dependent his account is upon a contestable and often oppressive ontology of harmony and wholeness.

7. Schiller and Foucault proceed from radically different ontological presumptions. What makes possible an aesthetic sensibility, according to Schiller, is the “play-drive,” gift of beneficent Nature, the creation of a God of grace. The experience of Beauty gives us a glimpse of the harmony originally designed for us: in the enjoyment of beauty “the practicability of the infinite being realized in the finite is thereby actually proven” (Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, 189). According to Foucault, however, we must not imagine that the world turns toward us a legible face. Although Foucault appeals to a standard of artistic balance, this balance is not the restoration of an inherent harmony but the skillful effect of an artist of the self who has subdued the demand to discover intrinsic harmonies.


10. Ibid., 31.


13. What is the “source” upon which one draws in such a case? It consists of fragments of subjectivity already formed by one means or another.

14. Eagleton makes a Foucaultian point, then, when he warns that Schiller’s attempt to conjoin reason with sentiment has the effect of inscribing power “in the minutiae of subjective experience” (*Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 20) and that it participates in the larger historical trend whereby “power is shifting its location from centralized institutions to the silent, invisible depths of the subject itself” (p. 27).
15. Foucault conceives of his analyses of the “limits that are imposed on us” to be at the same time “an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.” (Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?” 50)

16. According to Schiller, we shall remain barbarians as long as we fail to recognize that Reason’s “execution demands a resolute will and ardour of feeling” whose source is not Reason but the aesthetic disposition (On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 49).


18. “The relations between the growth of capacities and the growth of autonomy are not as simple as the eighteenth century may have believed” (Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?” 41).

19. I find support for this reading of Foucault as containing an “idealistic” element in Simons’s Foucault and the Political:

Greenblatt, whom Foucault cites, argues that the freedom of arts of the self consists not in self-creation itself but in the experience of self-formation in the face of all the other forces that fashion us. There is an interaction of control mechanisms that belies any belief that one is entirely what one made oneself, though Greenblatt feels the need to sustain the illusion that he is the principal maker of his identity: “To abandon self-fashioning is to abandon the craving for freedom, and to let go of one’s stubborn hold upon selfhood, even selfhood conceived as a fiction, is to die.” (p. 76)

23. Wolin, “Foucault’s Aesthetic Decisionism,” 73. Norris too reads the aesthetic turn in political theory as a dangerous “over-extension of aesthetic values or analogues,” involving the attempt to conquer and annex (Uncritical Theory, 167).

25. Foucault, Use of Pleasure, 31-2.

27. Alex Callinicos, Against Postmodernism (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 1989), 91. Eagleton too charges Foucault with an indifference toward the poor, linking this indifference to his claim that there is no where outside power: “It is the system itself, in a purely formalistic politics, which is the enemy; but this enemy is quite ineluctable, and like the poor will always be with us” (Ideology of the Aesthetic, 386).

30. Simons, Foucault and the Political, 80.

31. Foucault, like Nietzsche, is a materialist too. Every social formation, including the construction of the self, the structure of work, the forms of the law, is a materialization. What Foucault denies is that one set of practices is material and fundamental, while others simply respond to them.

32. Best and Kellner, Postmodern Theory, 290.
33. Eagleton, Ideology of the Aesthetic, 393.
35. Ibid., 313.
36. According to Eagleton, Foucault's "ethical ideal of an ascetic, dispassionate mastery over one's powers combines the best of coercion—to produce oneself involves a taxing, punitive disciple—with the best of hegemony: the subject has the autonomy of the hegemonic subject, but now in a radically more authentic manner" (Ideology of the Aesthetic, 391, my emphasis). But "authenticity" is not a Foucaultian goal, given his critique of the "true" self.

Wolin makes the related error of reading Foucault's "art of the self" as a decisionistic act of will. Once Wolin has done this, he can charge that Foucault underestimates the complexity of the process of self-individuation: "The appeal to the model of aesthetic self-fashioning seems facile and implausible, especially in contrast with the elaborate and painstakingly detailed descriptions of bio-power in Foucault's preceding works. Can the complex problems of modern self-individuation really be remedied, let alone solved, by way of a simple assertion of will, by the 'choice of a beautiful life'?" Richard Wolin, The Terms of Cultural Criticism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 192.

37. William Connolly makes this case eloquently and in detail in "Beyond Good and Evil: The Ethical Sensibility of Michel Foucault," Political Theory 21 (August 1993).


39. Ibid., 386.

40. Best and Kellner, Postmodern Theory, 290-2.

41. One might reply to Best and Kellner that if "practices of liberation" can only start "of course from a certain number of rules, styles, and conventions that are found in the culture," then "autonomy" is not quite the issue ("Aesthetics of Existence," 313).

Eagleton too misses the way in which Foucault advocates an ethics of reflective heteronomy. Instead he reads Foucault's "art of the self" as an attempt to combine "the concept of individual autonomy, which stands relatively free of the law, with the pleasures of sadomasochistic power such a law involves" (Ideology of the Aesthetic, 392). Eagleton objects that Foucault doesn't really "escape from the lures of traditional hegemony," for traditional hegemony too required a certain amount of "self-labour." "It is only by implicitly caricatureing it as a passive, docile receptivity to law that Foucault can effectively counterpose" it to his own ethic. But what if traditional hegemony requires self-labor? Foucault never claims to offer a radical escape from hegemony or normalization. Moreover, the self-labor he invokes does differ from that of "traditional hegemony": it is a deliberate and self-conscious labor in accordance with an individualized artistic design understood as operating within a system of externally imposed constraints.

Eagleton also objects to the fact that the self-hegemony of the ancient Greeks, which Foucault uses as a model, worked in conjunction with the hegemonic force of "a slave-based society" (p. 393). But there is nothing inherent in the project of self-fashioning that is pro-slavery.

42. Wolin, The Terms of Cultural Criticism, 192, my emphasis.

43. Best and Kellner, Postmodern Theory, 291.


Eagleton, too, worries that Foucault’s conception of power as ubiquitous “dangerously elides the distinctions between, say, fascistic and liberal capitalist forms of society” (Ideology of the Aesthetic, 387).

47. Wolin, “Foucault’s Aesthetic Decisionism,” 78.
49. Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 211.
50. Wolin, The Terms of Cultural Criticism, 192. Also: “Carte blanche is accorded to forms of life that are manipulative and predatory vis-à-vis other persons” (p. 84).

To his credit, Eagleton notes that in his later writings Foucault explored the possibility of an “aesthetic working upon oneself [as] as a sort of self-hegemony.” But Eagleton reads this as a response to the danger of conformity (coming “meekly under the sway of a heteronomous decree”) rather than as an attempt to mitigate the internal urge to dominate and oppress others (Ideology of the Aesthetic, 391).

53. Eagleton, Ideology of the Aesthetic, 388. In other places, according to Eagleton, Foucault resist his attraction to organism, as when in the second volume of the History of Sexuality (New York: Vintage, 1980) he attempts to replace “the mighty aesthetic organism of humanist hegemony, in which all component parts are ruled by a singular principle” with a “multitude of little individual artifacts, each of them relatively autonomous and self-determining” (p. 392).

55. Ibid., 389.
56. Ibid., 390.
57. Paul de Man charges Schiller with concealing the violence required by his totalistic project of aesthetic education. For a good discussion, see Jay, Force Fields, 75-7.
59. Foucault, Use of Pleasure, 26.
61. Ought one, for example, to engage in a long effort of learning, memorizations? or seek a sudden and irreversible change in behavior? or try to root out, down to the last hidden form, all forms of suspect desire?

62. “You can see,” says Foucault, “that the way the same rule is accepted [can be] quite different. And that’s what I call the mode d’assujettissement” (“On the Genealogy of Ethics,” 354).

In one mode of subjection, for example, obedience might be grounded upon divine law; in another, in a natural or cosmological order; in another, in a rational principle. Or one might strive to conform “because one acknowledges oneself to be a member of the group that accepts it,” or “because one regards oneself as an heir to a spiritual tradition that one has the responsibility of maintaining or reviving,” or because it gives “one’s personal life a form that answers to criteria of brilliance, beauty, nobility, or perfection” (Foucault, The Use of Pleasure, 27). This last rationale forms an important part of the Greco-Roman ethic examined in The Use of Pleasure, and Foucault’s positive portrayal of this mode of subjection is perhaps most responsible for earning him the epithet “aestheticizer.”

In other words, a response to the question, “What kind of being do we aspire to when we behave in a moral way?” (“On the Genealogy of Ethics,” 355).


To insist upon an “aesthetic” element in ethics for Foucaultian or Thoreauan reasons is not necessarily to affirm the practices and ideals historically associated with visual, musical or performing arts, or with their criticism. I hope in another essay to examine the means by which one typically iterated oneself as a critic or artist, in order to assess their contribution to the particular kind of sensibility I seek. I take as my point of departure here Ian Hunter’s “Aesthetics and Cultural Studies,” in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (London: Routledge, 1992), 347-72.


“I could have said, using rather current methods and schemes of thought, that certain prohibitions were effectively posed as such, and that others, more diffuse, were expressed in the form of morality. I don’t think there is a morality without a certain number of practices of the self” (Foucault, “The Concern for Truth,” 298).

Demda describes this reworking as “iteration.” Iteration “does not signify simply repeatability of the same, but rather alterability of this same idealized in the singularity of the event. It entails the necessity of thinking at once both the rule and event, concept and singularity.” *Limited Inc.*, 119.

In the plastic arts, “the aesthetic” is more a matter of crafting and making than of looking and viewing: beauty as wrought product rather than object of disinterested contemplation. Aesthetics is born in the mid-eighteenth century as a discourse of the body, but its life has involved a series of contests over which part of the body. Hegel, for example, argued that “the sensuous aspect of art is related only to the two theoretical senses of sight and hearing, while touch cannot have to do with artistic objects, which are meant to maintain themselves in their real independence and allow of no purely sensuous relationship” (*Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1975], 49). With its emphasis on technologies of the self, Foucault’s aesthetic seems to be a matter of the hand even more than the eye or ear.

The American nuclear industry has taken recently to presenting power plants as integral parts of nature preserves and recreational sites. For a good discussion of this, see Bill Moyers’s “Politics, People and Pollution,” PBS Video, Public Affairs Television, Inc., 1992.


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