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Practicing politics with Foucault and Kant: toward a critical life

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Michel Foucault's philosophy evokes ambivalent responses with respect to questions of politics. The most frequently cited reason for this ambivalence is Foucault's perceived failure to provide the normative framework that political endeavors are believed to require.1 Some philosophers and political theorists argue, however, that while Foucault's work is indeed not normative in a traditional sense, it nonetheless reflects certain normative commitments.2 The question of whether a 'mere' commitment provides sufficient grounds for an emancipatory politics has been particularly important for feminists. While many feminists find Foucault's work useful in identifying and diagnosing oppressive situations and contexts, the majority still believe that he cannot provide for ways of actively resisting oppression.3 Other feminists find Foucault's work apolitical at best.4

In this essay I respond to the claim that Foucault's work is normatively lacking and therefore possesses only limited political relevance. Foucault was indeed wary of the normalizing function that he believed norms frequently serve, but his critical interrogation of norms is not merely negative or destructive.5 Rather, Foucault intends to identify conditions under which norms become normalizing, clarify the oppressive nature of normalization, and create opportunities for developing non-normalizing and therefore emancipatory modes of existence. I argue that, through his appropriation of Kant's notion of critique, Foucault reconceptualizes normative political concepts such as obligation, freedom, autonomy and publicity in non-normalizing and therefore politically compelling ways. I also question the current reliance upon normativity as a source of legitimation in political theory and action. Subjecting norms, including the norm of normativity, to critical analysis may lead to their reformulation in ways that deprive them of foundational status, but it need not result in their destruction or abandonment. Indeed, from a Foucauldian perspective, such critical analysis increases possibilities for the practice of freedom.

I begin my analysis by drawing out the notion, as articulated in Foucault's work, of critique as a mode of existence rather than a philosophical method. The primary purpose of this analysis is to elucidate the political potential of the self-practices that comprise a Foucauldian ethos, potential that has been undertheorized. Foucault's treatment of practices of the self is, however, unsystematic; he speaks of 'self-creation' in different ways within a variety of texts. 6 In order to clarify as much as possible the politicization of practices of the self that I see occurring within Foucault's work, therefore, I mark a distinction (which Foucault himself does not) between two general forms that critique as a mode of existence may take: an 'aesthetics of existence' and a 'way of life'. Foucault develops the notion of an aesthetics of existence in Volumes II and III of *The History of Sexuality*, as well as in later lectures and interviews. The notion of a way of life is briefly discussed in the essay 'Friendship as a Way of Life' (1997c). As I see it, the distinction between an aesthetics of existence and a way of life is twofold: an aesthetics of existence is transformative and its effects are not limited to the individual; a way of life is transgressive and public.7 The significance of this distinction (which shall be elaborated and clarified later in the essay) is that transgressive and public practices are particularly relevant for emancipatory political endeavors within the current socio-historical context.

I proceed by arguing that the non-normalizing and therefore emancipatory character of a way of life emerges within Foucault's work on Kant, and I analyze both thinkers' responses to the question 'What is Enlightenment?' in order to support my claim. I show how Foucault reconceptualizes the concepts of obligation, autonomy, freedom and publicity in non-normalizing ways and suggest that his work can facilitate a similar reconceptualization of political unity. I refer to the public, transgressive, emancipatory mode of existence that I sketch out by way of this analysis as a 'critical life' in order to emphasize the shift toward the political that occurs in Foucault's work on Kant, as well as to underscore its debt to Kant himself. The movement that I trace from an aesthetics of existence to a critical life is, therefore, movement from a mode of existence that lacks current political relevance to one that possesses a high degree of political potential given prevailing socio-political conditions. I conclude with a preliminary investigation into the political efficacy of a critical life by discussing its relevance specifically for feminist politics.

An aesthetics of existence or 'art of living' as articulated and practiced by the ancient Greeks, according to Foucault, constitutes a mode of existence 'whose moral value did not depend either on one's being in conformity with a code of behavior, or on an effort of purification, but on certain formal principles' through which one 'distributes', 'observes' the particular limits of, and 'stratifies the use of

pleasures' (Foucault, 1990: 89). Foucault describes an art of living in terms of the practices of which it is comprised, 'those intentional and voluntary actions by which men seek not only to set themselves rules of conduct, but also to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria' (1990: 10–11). An aesthetics of existence has ethical significance, and this significance may be located, at least in part, in the distinction between 'acts and moral code' (Foucault, 1997a: 263). 'The acts', according to Foucault, 'are the real behavior of people in relation to the moral code imposed on them' (1997a: 263). The moral code regulates behavior not only through prescribing what kinds of behaviors are 'permitted or forbidden', but also through assigning 'positive or negative value [to] the different possible behaviors' (ibid.).8 For Foucault, ethics refers to a particular class of behaviors, which he refers to as 'the relationship you ought to have to yourself' (ibid.). This *rapport à soi* 'determines how the individual is supposed to constitute himself as a moral subject of his own activities' (ibid.).

The nature of the 'self' or subject and its relationship to such practices is frequently misconstrued. Some readers see Foucault presenting the self or subject as an authentic, unfettered entity whose possible options and ability to choose among those options are unrestricted and, therefore, 'free'. That is, the self appears to be the origin and creator of the practices that in turn express it. Foucault's description of practices of the self as occurring within the context of moral regulation, together with his claim that such practices form a relationship one 'ought' to have with oneself, suggest, however, that self-creation is not an unconstrained activity; while one does indeed constitute oneself as a subject through self-practices, doing so does not extricate one from prevailing social, political and ethical conditions. While we are able to decide how, when and in what way we engage in a particular set of practices (our actions are 'voluntary and intentional'), these decisions are always limited (though not determined) by our social context. The idea that transformation occurs in and through constraint, moreover, calls into question the idea that the self is necessarily prior to action. Foucault problematized the idea that 'there exists a human nature or base that, as a consequence of certain historical, economic, and social processes, has been concealed, alienated, or imprisoned in and by mechanisms of repression' (Foucault, 1997b: 282). Practices of the self do not, nor are they intended to, 'break . . . repressive deadlocks' and 'reconcile man with himself' (ibid.). Self-creation is not a process of discovering one's 'true self' but of (re)inventing oneself through practices that are simultaneously transforming and constraining. As David Halperin puts it, practices of the self 'cultivate' that part of the self that is 'most *impersonal* . . . namely the capacity to "realize oneself" by becoming other than what one is' (Halperin, 1995: 76; original emphasis).

Foucault connects the cultivation of this impersonal part of the self with 'aesthetics' or 'style'. 'From the idea that the self is not given to us,' he argues, 'there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art' (Foucault, 1997a: 262). Again, Foucault does not conceive of this self-creation in terms of authenticity. Given that the self is not ontologically prior to its practices, he argues, 'we should . . . relate the kind of relation one has to oneself to a creative activity' (ibid.). As Halperin points out, notions of 'aesthetics' or 'style' as they pertain to practices of the self are not reducible to either the 'fin-de-siècle aestheticism typically associated with Oscar Wilde' or the ' "dandyism" championed by Baudelaire' (1995: 73).9 The notion of style, rather than signifying something like the 'California cult of the self', refers to 'a rigorous, austere, and transformative technology of the self which produces concrete possibilities for the development of personal autonomy' (1995: 74).

A second misconception about practices of the self is that they are merely personal or individual. That an aesthetics of existence and practices of the self constitute a relationship of the self to itself seems to suggest that one 'works on oneself' completely independent of others. Foucault's descriptions and analyses of self-creation, however, consistently illustrate its social character. If practices of the self are constrained by a normative moral code, as Foucault argues they are, it follows that they occur within a social context. Foucault makes clear in Volumes II and III of *The History of Sexuality* that self-creation is the product of and in turn reproduces relations both with social institutions and with other people. 'Caring' for oneself involves self-governance, which in turn implies caring for and governing others; it is through properly caring for oneself that one is able to 'occupy his rightful position in the city, the community, or interpersonal relationships' (Foucault, 1997b: 287). Moreover, proper care of the self is made possible by way of the fundamental relationship between student and master (1997a).

Within the context of an aesthetics of existence, then, practices of the self do not authenticate a self that is predetermined and autonomous in a classical Kantian sense. Nor do such practices constitute a merely individual or personal 'lifestyle choice'. That such practices are transformative, that they facilitate the development of new ways of acting and thinking, suggests that they have political potential. For a mode

of existence comprised of practices of the self to be politically relevant within the present socio-historical context, however, I believe that two aspects of self-creation and self-transformation must be stated more positively and strongly.

First, practices of the self must be public, where 'publicity' expresses in a positive manner the idea that practices of the self are not merely individual. That is, self-creation must go at least some way toward facilitating non-normalizing connections between subjects and, more specifically, non-normalizing collective political action. Iris Marion Young's notion of a 'politics of inclusion' and Melissa Orlie's conception of 'politically constituted commonality' can help to illustrate what I mean by this kind of connection or collectivity (Young, 1990: 119; Orlie, 1997). Young describes a politics of inclusion as forming 'a heterogeneous public . . . in which persons stand forth with their differences acknowledged and respected, though perhaps not understood, by others' (1990: 119). Orlie describes politically constituted commonality as 'the conception of the political constituted by organized multitudes', and distinguishes it 'from an ontologically common sense of the world, a public sphere oriented toward agreement (either as actuality as or regulative ideal), and a sovereign unity or community' (1997: 82). Orlie further clarifies her idea when she states that politically constituted commonality is characterized by '[p]olitical enactment of the interdependence of commonality and plurality' (ibid.). Insofar as Orlie is using the term 'plurality' in the specifically Arendtian sense in which it connotes a condition such that persons are distinct from insofar as they are connected to one another, her notion of politically constituted commonality offers a vision of politics where differences are a condition for the possibility of collective political activity. Her formulation therefore builds upon or in a sense springs from Young's; if persons cannot be present in their differences to and be taken seriously by others, such differences cannot be politically relevant phenomena in the way that Orlie describes. The idea that differences do not simply characterize but are actually fundamental to politics is, I think, an important one for current emancipatory political endeavors generally, but particularly within a pluralist context.10

Even from the brief description Foucault provides in 'Friendship as a Way of Life', it seems apparent that practices of the self as they constitute a way of life are public in the sense described above. A way of life as Foucault conceives of it involves engaging in self-practices in ways that facilitate new (not yet conceptualized and non-normalizing) forms both of relating to oneself and of connecting with others. Foucault presents friendship as one such form of connection. 'A way of life', he states, 'can be shared among individuals of different age, status, and social activity. It can resemble intense relations not resembling those that are institutionalized. It seems to me that a way of life can yield a culture and an ethics' (1997c: 138). As expressive of a way of life, friendship does not somehow replace (and thereby release subjects from) the normalizing, 'institutionalized' relations that characterize a disciplinary society. Nor does it involve accepting existing modes of relating and simply trying to arrange them in new ways. Rather, differences ('age, status, and social activity') among individuals are fundamental to friendship as a mode of relating to others. One adopts a critical stance toward 'socially acceptable' relationships, adjusts the manner in which one relates to others, and connects with those with whom one ostensibly has nothing in common. Friendship as a way of life begins from a position of critical resistance, not acceptance, and from that position attempts to create something new: it is produced by and in turn fosters critical and creative capacities among and between subjects. As I see it, Foucault's notion of a way of life constitutes a positive response to the failure of traditional forms of connection: in reconceptualizing friendship he seems to be offering an initial formulation of non-normalizing relations among persons.

Second, as the above discussion of publicity suggests, the transformative character of practices of the self must have a critical component. Practices of the self must not only bring about change but in doing so must call into question the necessity of current modes of thought and action. These elements of critique and creation are interconnected in Foucault's notion of transgression. In its most general sense, transgression for Foucault means challenging pre-existing or given limits. Yet, for him, limits and their transgression are mutually constitutive; limits would be in a sense meaningless if they were not crossed, and transgression similarly derives its meaning by way of that crossing: '[t]he limit and transgression depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess' (Foucault, 1977: 34). Thus, while transgression is indeed critical, it is not merely negative. Rather, Foucault conceives of limit and transgression as involved in a kind of 'instantaneous play' through which transgression comes to accomplish not 'victory over limits' but the 'nonpositive' affirmation of 'limited being' (1977: 35). Foucault's point here seems to be that persons need not (nor can they) somehow get outside of their current context – break free from their current limits, as it were – in order to act or create change. Persons must instead focus on recognizing and identifying – clarifying – the limits that constrain them and work for

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change from within the space between limits and their transgression; the *play between* transgression and limit is a condition for the possibility of new modes of existence, hence the importance of creating and striving to maintain conditions under which this play may occur.

The transgressive character of self-practices is evident in Foucault's essay 'What is Enlightenment?'. There Foucault outlines an 'ethos' which he describes specifically in terms of self-practices: 'work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings' (Foucault, 1984: 47). As described in 'What is Enlightenment?', this work that persons perform on themselves does not extricate them from their current limits, but it does enable them to identify and clarify those limits, and in doing so to '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' (1984: 46). Practices of the self are transgressive in that they challenge given limits in productive ways; their aim, as Foucault puts it, is to 'grasp the points where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take' (ibid.). A life characterized by self-practices does not, therefore, merely entail rejecting what is given, but rather involves critically transforming it.

Thus far I have outlined the political potential of practices of the self by arguing that, as they comprise an ethos conceived specifically as a way of life, they possess a public and transgressive character. In what follows I analyze points of intersection and departure between the Kantian and Foucauldian perspectives on the question 'What is Enlightenment?' in order to support my claim that Foucault's politicization of practices of the self reflects a penchant for emancipatory change.

Kant conceives of enlightenment as a way for humanity to emerge from immaturity (Kant, 1983). Immaturity as Kant understands it is a state in which persons are under the tutelage of others such that they do not exercise their own reason: '*Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity . . .* immaturity is *self-imposed* when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use [reason] without guidance from another' (Kant, 1983: 41; original emphasis).[11] The 'motto of the Enlightenment' is therefore formulated as '*sapere aude*!', or '[h]ave the courage to use your own understanding' (ibid.). Kant is concerned specifically with reason in its public use. The private use of reason, he argues, 'may . . . often be very narrowly restricted, without otherwise hindering the process of enlightenment' (1983: 42). Persons utilize private reason in their roles as civil servants, such as the 'clergyman' who reasons 'for the sake of his congregation' (1983: 43). The clergyman is constrained in his use of reason by Church doctrine ('he is acting under instructions from someone else'), his audience (he is acting in the interests of a particular and limited group of people), and 'civic duty' (he must not criticize public policy) (ibid.).[12] Because the private use of reason is contingent, Kant argues that it cannot be free.

Persons do, however, occupy another role within society. In this role of 'scholar', individuals may 'publicly express [their] thoughts regarding the impropriety or even injustice' of state policies (1983: 43). In fact, Kant goes so far as to say that in this role persons are 'called' to 'impart to the public all of [their] carefully considered and well-intentioned thoughts', where the notion of a 'calling' implies a sense of obligation (ibid.). Moreover, insofar as 'the public' for Kant means 'the world', as scholars persons are not constrained by their audiences as they are in their roles as civil servants. In public reason one achieves 'an unrestricted freedom to use his own rational capacities and to speak his own mind' (ibid.). Because the public use of reason is free, it alone can bring about enlightenment: '[n]othing is required for this enlightenment however, except *freedom*; and the freedom in question is . . . the freedom to use reason *publicly* in all matters' (1983: 44; original emphasis). Given that reasoning publicly is unique to persons insofar as they are part of a larger social and political body, yet still distinct individuals, this use of reason creates, and positions persons within, a context distinct from that of both 'private individual' and 'human being'.

This unique positioning of persons such that they are able to use their own reason without authority raises a problem for Kant that takes the form of a potential crisis of legitimation. Establishing and maintaining the conditions for the possibility of the public use of reason, while important, is not sufficient from a Kantian perspective. This use of reason must be, more specifically, legitimate. Within Kant's critical philosophy, legitimation is achieved by way of obedience: we must not try to know what we cannot know; we are free insofar as we subject ourselves to the moral law. The problem arises out of the fact that enlightenment, a characteristically disobedient use of reason (we are to use our reason without the guidance of others), simultaneously facilitates (by combating immaturity) and threatens to undermine (by questioning the necessity of metaphysical foundations) human progress.[13] Enlightenment is characterized by a use of reason that can be legitimate without being obedient in the sense of adhering to predetermined boundaries or limits. Neither private reason, which is practiced insofar as one functions as 'a cog in a

machine', nor universal reason, which is practiced insofar as one is a human *qua* human, are potentially transgressive in this way (1983: 42).

Foucault argues that Kant ultimately legitimizes and, therefore, curtails the transgressive potential of his notion of enlightenment by way of his notion of critique. It is through critique, Foucault argues, that Kant asserts the command to obey: '*[a]rgue as much as you want and about what you want, but obey!*' (1983: 45; original emphasis). The public use of reason may be considered free when the authority of an enlightened ruler legitimates it. Like reason, then, freedom is characteristically obedient: we reason as free and autonomous subjects when we fulfill our obligation to respect the restrictions imposed by the command to obey, whether generated internally (by way of autonomy) or externally (by way of political authority).

While ultimately very different, Foucault's treatment of practices of the self as a way of negotiating the loss of metaphysical foundations in his own essay, 'What is Enlightenment?', nonetheless parallels Kant's treatment of public reason in some important respects. Foucault makes use of the same basic concepts that are significant for Kant (obligation, autonomy, freedom, publicity), yet because he exploits the transgressive potential implicit in Kant's work, Foucault reconceptualizes these concepts. Practices of the self, like the public use of reason, are a response to challenges posed by the present. In a context where normative modes of thought and action have been rendered problematic due to their normalizing potential, persons are 'obliged', so to speak, to seek out and develop new modes: practices of the self present themselves as an obligation that can be formulated as '*Work on yourselves!*'. Insofar as practices of the self both develop those capacities through which one becomes other than what one is and facilitate new forms of relating to others, freedom can no longer be conceived in terms of obedience. Foucault argues that it is through transgressing (not adhering to or seeking to re-establish) limits that one '[seeks] to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom' (Foucault, 1984: 46). Rethinking freedom in these ways prompts a reconceptualization of autonomy. For Kant, persons possess a unique quality (the ability to reason) that presents them with a particular burden (the obligation to reason publicly). For Foucault, our ability to work on ourselves can also be seen as unique and, in turn, presenting us with the obligation to perform that work. The Foucauldian subject, like its Kantian counterpart, can thus be understood to constitute itself as autonomous through fulfilling its obligation provided one makes two important distinctions: the Foucauldian subject positions itself squarely within relations of power, social and political institutions, and historical context, as well as calls into question rather than affirms its given subject-position.[14] For Foucault as for Kant before him, then, freedom is a function of an autonomous subject that is obligated to engage publicly in a particular (set of) practice(s) in a particular manner. But for Foucault the promise of politics may be located in transgressive 'work' on both individual and collective limits in ways that maximize opportunities for practicing freedom.

I believe that a Foucauldian reconceptualization of the political norms of obligation, freedom, autonomy and (as discussed earlier) publicity, can help to pave the way for a non-normalizing and therefore potentially emancipatory conception of political unity. Within a political context, unity tends to be construed in terms of consensus or agreement among political participants. Achieving unity by way of consensus is not problematic in principle. Applied within a pluralist context, however, the emphasis on homogeneity inherent within the notion of consensus may result in the further marginalization of already peripheral political participants, both individual and collective.[15] Recent conflict between feminism and the US political Left illustrates this point. While the relationship between the new social movements and the Left in the US has always been strained, it became even more conflictual during the late 1990s due, at least in part, to calls for the left to unify.[16] While I do not have sufficient space to fully outline the nature of such calls here, feminists have argued that the proposed unity could be achieved only by (re)subsuming the new social movements under the umbrella of, and (re)subordinating their concerns to, the agenda of a more traditional left politics.[17] Again, difference would have to be sacrificed for the sake of unification. As I see it, unity as a point of contention expresses larger political and philosophical issues and problems, which, if not addressed, will continue to plague and debilitate emancipatory political efforts. Given the realities of engaging in political activity within a pluralist society, there can be no recourse to a unified subject with a coherent identity that can pose and respond to questions regarding political problems, or to some 'core issue around which a mass progressive constituency might take shape' (Isaac, 1998: 144).

Thinking and acting in the company of others within a context where persons do not share an identity, values, or a common set of beliefs presents an ongoing political challenge. Given this challenge, rethinking unity in terms of a way of life, as one form that non-normalizing modes of connection between persons might take, rather than understanding it solely in terms of consensus or abandoning the very thought of it, may constitute a productive response to prevailing political conditions. While practices of the

self as Foucault conceives of them are individual and, therefore, concerned with the relationship between individuals and their socio-political present, it is possible to apply the notion of self-creation to relationships between groups as well. Freedom presents itself as an obligation to individuals insofar as they occupy a position within a broader social context. Given that, for Foucault, we are continuously in the process of negotiating relations of power, 'being part of a broader context' implies interaction with that context, which of course includes other persons. Foucault refers to practices of the self not only in terms of the fulfillment of a 'task' or obligation, but also as marking a 'relation of belonging', the notion of 'belonging' expressing a strong sense of relation (Foucault, 1984: 39). He conceives of freedom in terms of 'struggle', a term which, politically, connotes collective resistance – action (and hence, interaction among actors) against some obstacle. Moreover, Foucault makes a strong connection between struggle and material reality. He is less concerned with 'the representations that men give to themselves, and the conditions that determine them without their knowledge' than with 'what they do and the way they do it' (1984: 48). More specifically, he concerns himself with the 'freedom with which they act in . . . practical systems', a freedom that is responsive to 'what others do' (ibid.).

It is possible and, I think, productive, to think about groups as being similarly positioned within the context of collective struggles for freedom. From this perspective, particular groups engaged in particular political struggles are distinct insofar as they occupy a position within the broader political landscape. Taking the notion of obligation seriously here implies that when groups commit themselves to engaging in the collective practice of freedom, they also implicitly commit to the more general task of continually re-creating and supporting the conditions for the possibility of practicing freedom, without which any particular political struggle to improve worldly existence will not matter. This is not to posit some inherent or essential connection between all collective political action, but rather to say that action against oppression and normalization promotes the possibility of further such action because, from a Foucauldian perspective, it keeps power relations dynamic (a condition for the possibility of freedom) and thereby combats the move toward states of domination (static power relations; possibilities for freedom are minimal or absent).[18]

My analysis thus far pulls together various strands from Foucault's work in order to outline some aspects of a mode of existence that I see emerging within that work over time. This ethos, which I shall henceforth refer to as a 'critical life', emphasizes the importance of facing the present but not being overcome by it. It confronts persons with both an opportunity and an obligation to begin to challenge themselves and others to think, act and make connections in non-normalizing ways, to experiment, to take risks. It calls into question the idea that political forms that have been effective historically will continue to be viable. And it also seeks to expand opportunities for the practice of freedom.

Yet Foucault's critics argue that reconceiving norms in 'potentially' emancipatory terms and 'seeking to' create critical, transformative and non-normalizing modes of living without explaining exactly what practices of the self look like or the precise way in which they ought to be undertaken such that emancipatory results are indeed achieved is insufficient. The idea of a critical life appears to be lacking on the grounds that, insofar as he does not provide guidelines for how such transformation ought to be carried out, Foucault cannot guarantee that it will be emancipatory: his practices of freedom can easily be appropriated such that they come to serve oppressive ends. *Contra* his critics, however, it is not the case that Foucault cannot provide such guidelines; rather, he simply will not. For Foucault, the notion of guarantees, of security and certainty, is fundamentally opposed to freedom. Given the normalizing function that norms may serve, he views attempts to articulate and enforce regulatory, normative principles and concepts as something akin to totalitarian in nature and, therefore, as undermining the very possibility for emancipation. As Keith Gandal puts it, Foucault 'struggled for changes' but, because 'he was well acquainted with both the "futility and the dangers" ' of guarantees, 'he eschewed any impulse to lay out a blueprint for society' (Gandal, 1986: 124). Considering, if only briefly, the relevance of the notion of a critical life within a feminist context can provide a means of assessing the efficacy of Foucault's approach and also begin to give form to the idea of non-normalizing, emancipatory politics. Because feminists have traditionally been critical of Foucault's work, especially as it relates to politics, I will first address and respond to feminist critiques of Foucault's notion of practices of the self as presented by Jean Grimshaw and Lois McNay.[19]

Grimshaw acknowledges that '[t]he theme of "practices of freedom" seems to . . . be an extremely important one for feminism', but she nonetheless concludes that Foucault's conceptualization of such practices is sorely lacking in terms of its feminist potential (Grimshaw, 1993: 60).[20] Grimshaw thinks that practices of the self as Foucault conceives of them are, like the ancient notion of care of the self,

characteristically male, that self-creation is merely individual and aesthetic (in the reductive sense of a lifestyle choice), and that Foucault's conceptualization of the subject is 'too thin' (1993). Grimshaw, as well as McNay, expresses concern about the lack of normative foundations in Foucault's work. Grimshaw argues that the 'formalistic' and 'subject-centered' nature of Foucault's notion of self-creation precludes any discussion of or deliberation about the status of 'moral absolutes' (1993). McNay likens Foucault to 'some postmodern thinkers, particularly Lyotard', and argues that he 'employs a vocabulary of political engagement, using concepts such as free speech, truth, and ethics' but does not 'examine . . . the normative implications of these concepts that shore up his rhetoric of post-humanist ethics remain' (1992: 139, 141). Like Habermas, she views Foucault's work as contradictory, 'confused' and normatively lacking (1992: 155). Like Grimshaw, McNay views practices of the self as merely aesthetic, yet she identifies the merely individual scope of practices of the self as the primary limitation of an aesthetics of existence, because it deprives such an existence of any political impulse, let alone a feminist one (1992). She argues that 'the most serious drawback with Foucault's presentation of ethics of the self as a solitary process, rather than as socially integrated activity, is that it is unclear how such an ethics translates into a politics of difference that could initiate deep-seated social change' (1992: 177).[21]

Grimshaw's and McNay's remarks reflect the same criticisms of Foucault's work that I have addressed in this essay: practices of the self are merely individual; practices of the self are merely aesthetic; Foucault's articulation of practices of the self lacks normative content. Having addressed ways in which Foucault's work facilitates the reconceptualization of specific norms, at this point I want to consider the broader, more implicit claim of Grimshaw and McNay that political endeavors require normative foundations. My concern here is less with whether politics does indeed require such foundations than it is with the effects of uncritically assuming their necessity. When normativity is seen as a condition for the possibility of politics it becomes impossible to think about politics in any other terms. Potentially emancipatory ways of thinking and acting which violate or call into question the necessity of prevailing political norms are considered anti-political, opposed to freedom, and are therefore rejected. Hence Foucault's claims about the link between norms, normalization and oppression: his work points to the oppressive nature of such uncritical rejection and suggests that norms such as freedom can be rethought without being abandoned.

Even a cursory look at the history of US feminism suggests that Foucault's problematization of prevailing socio-political norms and association of their uncritical acceptance with oppression is consistent with rather than opposed to the aims of feminist thought and action. Within a context of male dominance and female subordination, it has always been in feminism's interests to challenge norms, and feminists continue to do so. Moreover, within feminism itself, white middle-class women's uncritical assertion of their own, limited experiences and perspectives as representative of all women has been challenged as oppressive: it is not simply the case that some women's concerns and opinions are voiced while others are not, but rather it is precisely because some women are excluded and silenced that others are heard. Given their recognition of ways in which particular norms can function in normalizing and oppressive ways, why do feminists continue to treat the overarching norm of normativity as foundational and, therefore, outside of the realm of critique and beyond deliberation? Should feminists not subject it to the same kind of critical interrogation as norms of male dominance, white supremacy, compulsory heterosexuality, and economic injustices? My analysis suggests that doing so need not result in the jettisoning of the concept of normativity. Rather, critically analyzing normativity's status as a privileged mode of legitimation can facilitate an understanding both of its function and its effects within feminist discourse, not all of which may be positive or productive and, indeed, some of which may be oppressive. But it is up to feminists to determine how this critical work ought to be done, and to do so in the absence of guarantees about its effectiveness and success. As Karen Vintges argues, feminism aims to 'make women free so that they can create new situations, new cultural meanings, and new ways of experiencing what life as a woman can be' (1999).[22] Struggling against women's oppression opens up opportunities and presents an obligation for women to create new modes of existence, or ways of life.

Thus understood, feminism seems to be predisposed to this kind of critically creative work – the work that characterizes a critical life. A critical life offers a vision of an emancipatory, practical politics that is able to function, even thrive, within a context where traditional foundations for action and thought are no longer reliable; it does not celebrate the absence of foundations but rather posits a pragmatic approach to living without them. Insofar as it shows that prevailing modes of existence are not necessary modes, a critical life makes clear that the demise of normative foundations does not mark the end of thinking and acting as such. Similarly, while this demise may mark the end of the uncritical deployment of

accepted political strategies, it does not mark the end of politics. A critically creative approach to politics provides for a way both of rejecting normalizing political forms and of (continually) developing and experimenting with new and potentially emancipatory forms.

I think Foucault's refusal to offer easy or permanent solutions to difficult problems is a large part of the reason why he is often dismissed as an apolitical thinker, or as one who simply prescribes to a 'politics of despair': asking people to work, and work hard, not only on society but also on themselves without guidance and with no guarantee of success is not a request many today would grant. Foucault's belief that it is impossible to guarantee emancipatory change, together with his attitude toward attempts to provide such guarantees, help to explain why he refers both to practices of the self and to the practice of freedom as 'work': when striving for change in the way that he suggests, 'we are always in the position of beginning again' (1984: 47). While being in such a position need not imply that no meaningful change can happen, 'that no work can be done except in disorder and contingency', it does require persons to approach political activity from the rather unlikely perspective that injustices and oppression are not going to be permanently eradicated (ibid.). That Foucault thinks politics must be approached from this particular perspective does not necessarily mean that he believes that injustices and oppression are permanent fixtures. Rather, it suggests that, given the normalizing potential of norms, this is presently the most pragmatic way to approach politics.

While I think Foucault is right when he argues that there are no easy solutions, that there is no 'way out' that is not fraught with conflict or even danger, I also think that his political approach provides for a means not of simply enduring such a situation but of engaging and struggling to transform it. Living a critical life requires those who take it seriously both to think the thought of change and to put that thought into practice. To believe that I can be other than what I currently am, that things need not be as they currently are, that I can relate to persons in ways that I am not yet aware of, is not mere naïveté. It constitutes an engagement with the present which acknowledges and actively engages with its limits and constraints but which refuses to see them as insurmountable obstacles. A critical life is a not a life of blind optimism, false hope, despair, or 'non-participation' (Gandal, 1986: 122). It is a life of 'tactical hyper-activism', a 'patient labor giving form to our impatience for liberty' (ibid.; Foucault, 1984: 50). There is an inherent risk but also an inherent promise in using Foucault's 'tools'; he leaves it to us to decide if the risk is worth taking.

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Notes

1   See the following essays in Kelly, 1994a: Bernstein, 'Foucault: Critique as a Philosophical Ethos' (1994); Honneth, 'Foucault's Theory of Society: A Systems-Theoretic Dissolution of The Dialectic of Enlightenment' (1994); and McCarthy, 'The Critique of Impure Reason: Foucault and the Frankfurt School' (1994). See also Habermas, 'Taking Aim at the Heart of the Present' (1986).

2   See the following essays in Kelly, 1994a: Kelly, 'Foucault, Habermas, and the Self-Referentiality of Critique' (1994b); Sawicki, 'Foucault and Feminism: a Critical Reappraisal' (1994); and Schmidt and Wartenberg, 'Foucault's Enlightenment: Critique, Revolution, and Fashioning of the Self' (1994). See also, Dreyfus and Rabinow, 'What is Maturity? Foucault and Habermas on "What is Enlightenment?" ' (1986) and Hoy, 'Foucault and Critical Theory' (1998).

3   Feminists who recognize and develop the political potential of Foucault's work include Amy Allen, 'Foucault on Power: A Theory for Feminists' (1996); Moya Lloyd, 'A Feminist Mapping of Foucauldian Politics' (1996); Margaret McLaren, 'Foucault and the Subject of Feminism' (1997); Jana Sawicki, 'Feminism, Foucault, and "Subjects" of Power and Freedom' (1998); and Ladelle McWhorter, *Bodies and Pleasures* (1999).

4   See Monique Deveaux, 'Feminism and Empowerment: a Critical Reading of Foucault' (1996); Nancy Fraser, 'Michel Foucault: a "Young Conservative?"' (1994); Nancy Hartsock, 'Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?' (1990).

5   Foucault's work reflects a (seemingly normative) commitment to improving the state of the world, a task that seems to require at least some (again, seemingly normative) notion of what constitutes 'improvement' and how it might be achieved.

6   See, for example, Volume II of *The History of Sexuality*: *The Use of Pleasure* (1990), Volume III of *The History of Sexuality*: *The Care of the Self* (1988a), *Technologies of the Self* (1988b), and 'The Ethics of Care for the

Self as the Practice of Freedom' (1997b).

7   I see Nietzsche's influence in Foucault's reconceptualization of critique in terms of a mode of existence. Foucault's understanding of critique as transformative in a specifically transgressive sense is quite similar to Nietzsche's notion of the revaluation of all values, which involves calling into question current modes of existence or, in other words, recognizing contingency where necessity has been assumed; developing new ways of thinking and acting can occur only as a result or in the context of such critical questioning. Nietzsche's radical challenge to the philosophical tradition enables Foucault in some ways to assume the first and crucial component of critique and focus primarily upon the second: identifying and expanding possibilities for positive change.

8   Foucault illustrates the two aspects or functions of the code by way of the following examples: prescriptively, 'you're not supposed to have sex with anyone but your wife'; with respect to value, '[y]ou can have a girl in the street or anywhere, if you have very good feelings toward your wife' (1997a: 263). The androcentric nature of the examples notwithstanding, Foucault's point seems to be that the code provides norms of conduct through which particular kinds of acts become the content of a problematics of morality.

9   Halperin is not suggesting that there is no relationship between dandyism and Foucault's notion of self-creation. Indeed, he argues that Foucault 'took [dandyism] seriously as a form of ethical self-fashioning . . . [and] self-transformation' (1995: 73). See David Halperin, 'The Queer Politics of Michel Foucault', in *Saint Foucault* (1995: 15–125).

10   In her essay, 'Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder, and Enlarged Thought', Young develops a notion of respect that is relevant within a context of difference. It is interesting to note that like Orlie, Young turns to Hannah Arendt in formulating her ideas on this issue. I find Young's notion of asymmetrical reciprocity quite compelling. Problematizing the notion of authenticity, she makes the strong claim that '[i]t is neither possible nor morally desirable for persons engaged in moral interaction to adopt one another's standpoint' and argues that within a context of asymmetry and irreversibility respect is in fact possible only when persons recognize and attempt to negotiate this impossibility (1997a: 39). Therefore, she argues, 'understanding' might be rethought in terms of 'getting out of ourselves and learning something new' (ibid.: 53). While Young formulates the notion of asymmetrical reciprocity primarily for the purposes of analyzing moral interaction, I think it has important implications for interaction between political actors at the current historical moment. See Iris Marion Young, 'Asymmetrical Reciprocity' (1997a: 38–59).

11   See Kant, 'An Answer to the Question: "What is Enlightenment?" ' (1983: 41–8).

12   It is important to note that Kant is not positing a separate and distinct class of persons, 'scholars', who are entitled to reason publicly while everyone else is necessarily constrained. Rather, he states that '*the same person* does not act contrary to civic duty when, *as a scholar*, he publicly' criticizes public policy (1983: 43; emphasis added).

13   See Dreyfus and Rabinow (1986) on this point.

14   As Jeremy Moss points out, '[a]utonomy is not a word that is usually associated with Foucault's writings' (1998: 153). Moss argues, however, that a conception of autonomy emerges in Foucault's later work, specifically enabled by his notion of the self's relation to itself. Moss sees Foucault arguing in 'What is Enlightenment?', for example, that 'we need to constitute ourselves as autonomous beings; that is, while recognizing that the development of our capacities is a product of our historical circumstances, we nonetheless have (and ethically need) the ability to perform work on ourselves' (1998: 154). By Moss's reading, the fact that subjects are able to submit themselves to their own transformative efforts implies 'that subjects have the ability to choose autonomously a course of action or set of goods' (ibid.). Autonomy here can be understood, then, as the ability to use and necessity of using '[one's] capacities reflectively to choose a type of good', which, for Foucault, is 'the final shape of one's capacities' (where 'capacities' are understood as an individual's 'moral and intellectual powers') (ibid.). According to Moss, 'an autonomous agent is [thus] one who uses his or her . . . capacities to choose a conception of the good for which he or she can be held responsible' (ibid.). Part of what Moss does in his essay is to compare and contrast Foucault's conceptualization of the political with that of John Rawls – a project that at points renders Foucault's work almost unfamiliar. Yet it seems to me that Moss's is ultimately a productive exercise, insofar as his aim is not to reduce Foucault's work to Rawls's (nor does he do so) but rather, through looking at Foucault's work from an unlikely perspective, to explicate political potential where it otherwise might not be found. Moss (1998).

15   Susan Bickford's arguments in 'Listening, Conflict, Citizenship', Chapter 1 of her book *The Dissonance of Democracy* (1996: 1–24), are particularly instructive on this point.

16   I am referring in particular to the First Principles series published in *The Nation* beginning in April of 1997. See also Gitlin (1995) and Rorty (1998).

17   See Butler (1998), Willis (1998) and Young (1997b).

18   While similarities exist between my claim and Sartre's in 'Existentialism is a Humanism', there are also fundamental differences. For Sartre, freedom characterizes the human condition: to be human is to be free. For Foucault, one is free insofar as one is implicated in power relations; freedom is understood in terms of a response to one's present. Moreover, Sartre makes the strong claim that the freedom of one depends upon the freedom of all, just as the freedom of others depends upon my freedom; the freedom of one is necessarily connected to the freedom of all. The point that can be derived from Foucault's work is weaker: practicing freedom reproduces conditions under which the practice of freedom can occur. See Sartre (2001). For a succinct discussion of the relationship between power and freedom see Foucault (1983).

19   Jana Sawicki provides an alternative reading of Foucault on the issues of norms and practices of the self. According to Sawicki, although Foucault does not theorize traditional normative foundations in his work he nonetheless does provide ways 'for distinguishing malevolent and benign or beneficial forms of power' (1998: 101). One such way, according to Sawicki, is through his distinction between power and domination. In making this distinction Foucault 'denies that all forms of power are pernicious' (ibid.). Moreover, she argues, Foucault also distinguishes between various forms of power, such as 'exploitation, racial and ethnic hegemony, and "subjection"' (ibid.). With respect to practices of the self, Sawicki argues that they may *seem* to be merely individualistic because Foucault is operating on the level of micro-power. She makes the crucial point that 'Foucault's principal objective . . . was to provide tools that subjugated individuals might enlist in a particular set of struggles', not to develop a general theory of liberation (1998: 105). Because feminists such as Grimshaw and McNay view freedom and liberation as ultimately opposed to power, Foucault's normative commitments will always fall short from their perspectives. See Sawicki (1998).

20   Grimshaw explicitly states that 'the ethic of care for the self in antiquity, as described by Foucault, seems light-years from anything that feminists might want to endorse' (1993: 65).

21   McNay finds Habermas's work more appropriate for feminist and political purposes. She argues that Habermas's emphasis on the importance of consensus as a regulative ideal highlights the shortcomings of Foucault's work for conceptualizing a politics of 'solidarity'. See 'Self and Others', Chapter 5 in *Foucault and Feminism* (1992).

22   Vintges argues that Foucauldian practices of the self possess both political potential and value for feminism. In her work on Simone de Beauvoir, Vintges shows that a distinctly 'feminine' mode of existence is possible which does not reify stereotypical notions of femininity or posit essential womanhood. She argues that 'Beauvoir's own life and work amount to the creation of a new ethos as a woman without speaking in the name of woman as an essential subject, and without a strong articulation of gender' (1999: 141). As Vintges sees it, Beauvoir's 'art of living' is exemplary for a contemporary feminism that struggles against women's oppression as women, on the one hand, but seeks to wage that struggle in the name of women, on the other. Through self-creation, Beauvoir was able to construct herself as a woman and to serve as an example to other women, but also to avoid constructing 'ready-made models for a common, new identity for women' (ibid.). Vintges is not, therefore, advocating something akin to cultural feminism – a 'women's culture' or 'feminine essence'. She explicitly states: '[f]eminists should not have pretensions to truth discourses' (1999: 142). As Vintges puts it, arts of living 'can, of course, have very different contents . . . feminism is more an umbrella name for all the different styles which try to offer an alternative to the dominant culture's [notion of] femininity' (ibid.). Thus, Vintges is in fact concerned with a *feminist* art of living (or way of life), and herein lies her concern with politics. Her work suggests that within the context of a feminist politics, individual difference must be fundamental to collective action. Like Beauvoir and Foucault before her, she finds normalization extremely problematic and anti-political and therefore seeks not truth 'but an 'ethos . . . formulated in singular rather than plural terms' (ibid.).

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