Foucault's Aesthetics of Existence

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To become a work of art is the object of living
– Oscar Wilde

What role has aesthetics in the later work of Michel Foucault? In the final completed volumes of his *History of Sexuality* (translated as *Vol. 2, The Use of Pleasure* and *Vol. 3, The Care of the Self*) aesthetic activity becomes a key to his understanding of the vagaries of sexuality in the Greek and Greco-Roman periods.[1] Sexuality in Antiquity is understood by reference to what Foucault variously calls 'the care of the self', 'practices of the self', 'techniques of the self' or 'an aesthetics of existence'. As Peter Dews has noted, Foucault here shifts from the seemingly subject-less world encapsulated in the 'death of man' in *The Order of Things* (1966), to a world of 'self-constituting subjects' busily creating themselves according to aesthetic criteria.[2] I want to argue that Foucault's later work vacillates between recommending some form of aestheticisation of everyday life and a 'problematisation' of the role of the aesthetic in contemporary social and political life. Whereas the latter makes a positive contribution to recent philosophical debates, the former runs into serious theoretical difficulties already encountered in Foucault's earlier work. In order to show the persistence of certain theoretical problems in his work I will consider three aspects of Foucault's use of a concept of the aesthetic.

First, it is important to get clear about the way in which Foucault uses the term 'aesthetic'. Foucault shows two ambiguities in his use of this term. Historically, the concept of the aesthetic varies greatly, whether one is considering Ancient Greek texts on *Ars Erotica*, Kantian philosophy or Baudelaire's account of the dandy in the nineteenth century. Foucault seems insufficiently attentive to these distinctions. This raises the problematic status of Foucault's discussion of aesthetics in relation to the present day. How far does he advocate – implicitly since he clearly denies the point explicitly – an 'aesthetics of existence' as a contemporary strategy? And what are the consequences of such a position?

The second aspect I will consider is Foucault's difficulty with questions of normativity. Numerous critics have stated that in his earlier work, for example on prisons or asylums, Foucault's descriptions of various regimes of power-knowledge contrive to be both politically engaged and yet normatively neutral, calling for resistance to certain forms of power but unable, as Nancy Fraser puts it, to say why 'struggle is preferable to submission'.[3] Foucault thus lacks the normative criteria for distinguishing between 'good' or 'bad' forms of power or social practice.[4] Does the later Foucault's use of aesthetics, if it can be shown to be historically specific and of contemporary relevance, avoid the dilemmas of this normative neutrality or does it merely compound them?

Finally, the relation Foucault proposes between aesthetics and power is in need of clarification. If Foucault eschews explicit avowal of normative criteria for distinguishing forms of power, it is nevertheless true that he often covertly prefers certain relations of power. This appears the case if we interpret the 'aesthetics of existence' as strategies designed to practise power over the self by the self. Whereas the 'disciplinary power' over the body dissected in *Discipline and Punish* is a regime ripe for what we might term Foucault's non-normative disapproval, the self-control over the body discussed in the volumes on Greek sexuality is presented in a much more positive light.[5] Why this oscillation on power and the body? Is aesthetics here used to distinguish 'good' from 'bad' forms of power over the body? If so, then are these sufficient conditions to enable the formation of such judgements?

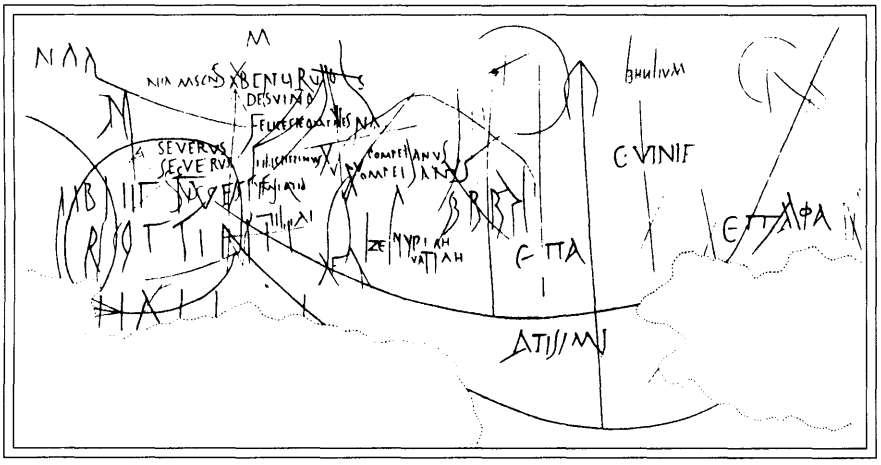
There are close links between these questions, and separating them merely aims to provide a principle of structure. The scope of the term 'aesthetic' and its ability or inability to bear the burden of normativity results, I want to argue, is revealed in Foucault's need to distinguish his account of power from that of a theory of domination. This, in turn, requires a concept of freedom which could underpin his notion of power. However, the aestheticisation of the notion of freedom employed by Foucault raises severe problems if we are to take these final texts as composed not 'for, but in terms of, a contemporary situation'.[6]

I

Aesthetics as established since the mid-eighteenth century has dissociated art from practical ends: for Kant aesthetic judgements are characterised by their 'pure disinterested delight'.[7] Aesthetic objects should serve no ends other than their own. Judgements over the actions of human beings (traditionally the realm of the ethical) must broach this formula since they are judgements with an interest (what

should I do? what is the right action for me?). For Kant such moral judgements are also distinguished from aesthetics by their rule-bound nature.

There have been many critiques of this doctrine of the autonomy of the aesthetic.[8] However, it is unclear whether Foucault's work on Greek sexuality is a critique or an endorsement of this post-Kantian heritage. This is because he confuses a Greek and post-Kantian sense of the term 'aesthetic'. In an interview in 1983 Foucault was asked about the shift in his studies of sexuality from sex per se, to 'techniques of the self'.[9] Foucault argues that the most striking fact about the Greeks is that these 'techniques of the self', the self-fashioning of one's own subjectivity, involve linking ethics with aesthetics: 'Greek ethics is centered on a problem of personal choice, of aesthetics of existence.'[10] The principal concern of, for example, Stoic ethics is described as an 'aesthetic one'.[11] This is clearly a sense of 'aesthetic' that is not recognisably Kantian: the autonomy of the aesthetic is negated, and ethics is to be informed not by universal moral codes but by the subjective aspect, the 'personal choice' of aesthetic judgement. Indeed, as Dews notes, it would be anachronistic to apply the post-Kantian meaning of 'aesthetic' to the Greek term, where aesthetics is intermeshed with social and ethical practices.[12] However, this is an error Foucault commits at the very start of *The Use of Pleasure* when, in initially defending the Greek aesthetics of existence, he states that they 'no doubt lost some of their importance and *autonomy*' (2: 11; my emphasis) with the rise of Christianity.



Ambiguity over the historical meanings of key terms is evident in other statements by Foucault on the supposed identification of ethics with aesthetics. One example is found in Foucault's comments on the differences between two senses of morality: 'codes of behaviour and forms of subjectivation' (2: 29). It is the second sense that Foucault is primarily interested in, a study of the ethics or 'practices of the self' which form one as a moral subject, rather than the moral codes or norms to which one must conform. Foucault is interested in the way in which morality as 'forms of subjectivation' in Greek and Greco-Roman writing is displaced by the more codified morality of the early Christian period. Christianity did not borrow certain moral codes, and reject others, from Greek moral discourse upon sexuality. Rather Christianity modified or transformed the ethical practices of the self found in Greek discourses (2: 31-32).[13] Greek texts upon the ethical dimension of sexuality did not present the 'care of the self' as a universal rule all must obey, but rather as 'a principle of stylization of conduct for those who wished to give their existence the most graceful and accomplished form possible' (2: 250-51). Greco-Roman sexual acts were not codified and sifted according to the norms of 'good' or 'bad'; instead they were judged by aesthetic criteria of beauty and style.

To illustrate this point Foucault discusses Plutarch on married life. In Plutarch, Foucault comments, moral regulation of permitted and forbidden acts, along the lines of moral norms or rules of conduct, are not to be found. Instead Plutarch recommends 'a mode of being, a style of relations' (3: 184). Foucault then states: 'The ethics of marriage and the advice on conjugal life are at the same time universally valid principles and rules for those who wish to give their existence an honorable and noble form. It is the *lawless universality of an aesthetics of existence*' (3: 184-85; my emphasis). Thus it is a set of principles that are recognisably Kantian in form: conjugal rules are universal in scope but are only created by the judgement of the individual subject. Foucault writes that Greek morality was one in which 'the individual did not make himself into an ethical subject by universalizing the principles that informed his action' (2: 62), thus distancing it from a Kantian categorical imperative.[14] On the contrary, to be a moral person was to act 'by means of an attitude and a quest that individualised his action, modulated it, and perhaps even gave him a special brilliance by virtue of the rational and deliberate structure his action manifested' (2: 62). Such an act could conform to the rational structure of the aesthetic only by reaching out to others to become, in Kant's terms, 'subjectively universal'.[15] An act of 'personal choice' is thus integrated into a 'lawless universality'. For some act to possess 'structure' relies upon a universal recognition of the nature of objects and acts to be described as structured. So Foucault's description of the Greek version of aesthetics seems to owe much to a Kantian notion of art as universal and yet simultaneously subjective.

Foucault's description of ancient 'practices of the self' therefore displays a certain semantic slipperiness in relation to the use of the term aesthetic. More substantial difficulties appear when his work is related to the present. If the Greeks had an undissociated sense of the aesthetic and the ethical life can we really look back to them as exemplars when our senses of the ethical and aesthetic are so clearly divorced? In a number of places Foucault explicitly denies that he is valorising and offering Greek practices as a contemporary strategy.[16] But in the 1983 'Genealogy of Ethics' interview Foucault does admit an affinity between Greek ethics and contemporary political projects: 'Recent liberation movements suffer from the fact that they cannot find any principles on which to base the elaboration of a new ethics. They need an ethics, but they cannot find any other ethics than an ethics founded on so-called scientific knowledge of what

the self is.'[17] Kantian morals, rooted in rational obedience to the universal law, are once again the target of Foucault's critique. Liberatory movements cannot base their ethics upon old-style norms due to the break-up of Enlightenment universalism. Any new ethics informing politics, for Foucault, must involve a new form of aestheticised ethics. In response to a question in the same interview asking, 'What kind of ethics can we build now?', Foucault answers:

> What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. That art is something which is specialized or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?[18]

Clearly this is a definition of aesthetic autonomy and its negation in a classic sense: art is separated from both 'individuals' and 'life'. But in proposing that one's life should become a work of art it is unclear which sense of aestheticisation is implied. On the one hand it might refer to the project of the twentieth-century avant-garde described by Peter Bürger, whereby art is severed from its autonomous position, and re-integrated into everyday life in order to become the organising principle of a new life praxis.[19] However, as Bürger argues, this project failed, due to lack of attention to the *institutional* foundations of art.[20] Art as institutionalised autonomy thwarts any attempt to produce an aestheticisation of one's life. So Foucault's recommendation here might entail a Greek sense of the term aesthetic. But here there has been no separation of art and everyday life; rather aesthetics is already bonded to an ethical realm of praxis. If Foucault is advocating something like the Greek version of aesthetics/ethics, then turning one's life into an art object in the present cannot capture this Greek concept, for the simple fact that art objects as presently constituted contain no intrinsic ethical dimension. Creating the self in the present according to contemporary aesthetic principles, the only ones currently available to us, could not produce an ethical art object only an autonomous one. But that would be to ignore the powerful institutional pressure preventing the channelling of autonomy from lamps or houses towards human lives.

II

In another interview Foucault states the case for the contemporary relevance of Greek aesthetics with some vigour.

> From Antiquity to Christianity, we pass from a morality that was essentially the search for a personal ethics to a morality as obedience to a system of rules. And if I was interested in Antiquity it was because, for a whole series of reasons, the idea of morality as obedience to a code of rules is now disappearing, has already disappeared. And to this absence of morality corresponds, must correspond, the search for an aesthetics of existence.[21]

What is striking here is the normative force of the 'must'. Why, we might ask, *must* aesthetics replace some reformulated version of ethics?[22]

Foucault's normative endorsement of an aesthetics of existence is striking given the common understanding and critique of his work as neutral in respect of such judgements.[23] It is clear that, as Nikolinakos argues, there is 'a substantial normative dimension' to Foucault's later work, a change designed in part to overcome the contradictions of advocating resistance alongside a stance of neutrality.[24] His use of a concept of aesthetics is central to his attempt to avoid this impasse. Two interpretations of this use of the aesthetic can be outlined. Foucault might be claiming that a contemporary aesthetics of existence, that which will help decide between various courses of action, will be modelled on Greek lines. Normative guidelines are thus implied in any description of an act as aesthetically pleasing, beautiful or stylish because of the coalescence of aesthetics and ethics. To say some action is beautiful is to imply that it is also a good act. Alternatively, Foucault's contemporary aesthetics of existence might be a Kantian version, ruled by the concept of autonomy. In this case, any action has the virtue of being self-justifying and self-regulating. As Kant puts it, 'Taste lays claim simply to autonomy.'[25]

The difficulty with a 'Greek' interpretation of Foucault's position is one already indicated, of whether we can reconfigure aesthetic and ethical realms in a contemporary world where they are so clearly distinct. Foucault's normative 'must', that aesthetics of existence should replace moral codes, might point towards some future rearrangement of the spheres of the cognitive, the ethical and the aesthetic, in which the specific values of each realm intermingle and temper the other. This would bring Foucault closer to the views of Habermas on the negation of the autonomy of the aesthetic. For Habermas, a 'reified everyday praxis can be cured only by creating unconstrained interaction of the cognitive with the moral-practical and the aesthetic-expressive elements'.[26] Some similarity with the Greek interaction of ethical with aesthetical realms might then be a consequence. But it would certainly not be identical to the Greek version of an aesthetics of existence. Looking back to the Greeks could only be as an historical reminder that our present configuration of these various realms is not set in stone, but is capable of rearrangement.

A more critical interpretation of Foucault's 'Greek' position is that it is, in Richard Wolin's phrase, a 'pan-aestheticism', whereby the term 'aesthetic' becomes unruly, and wantonly spreads its terms of reference over other realms of life.[27] For Wolin, this means 'art loses its aesthetic specificity' as a realm of social critique and utopian promise.[28] The corollary of this is that aestheticism, as it rules over other life-spheres, ultimately leads to praise for actions which are 'manipulative and predatory vis-à-vis other persons'.[29] Other people are simply the springboards for exercises in self-fashioning. But Wolin's argument imputes a content to Foucault's aesthetics of existence which does not necessarily follow from the merely formal principle of trying to stylise one's actions in an aesthetic manner. Aestheticisation might lead to a 'predatory' relation to others, but it might equally lead to an imaginative and sympathetic relation to them via intersubjective discussion of what actions are to be regarded as beautiful, stylish and good. Foucault himself writes that the art of existence was

'a question of knowing how to govern one's own life in order to give it the most beautiful possible form (in the eyes of others, of oneself, and of the future generations '.[30] What is wrong, we might say, with wishing to see the other life-spheres infused with the best qualities that, traditionally, another life-sphere has possessed? Ultimately Wolin's argument seems to require a status quo approach to the relation of cognitive, moral and aesthetic realms, shown in his desire for the separate realms to display 'balance' and have 'boundaries well-defined'.[31]

The problem with the 'Kantian' interpretation of Foucauldian aesthetics is that it is, as Terry Eagleton puts it, 'troublingly formalistic'.[32] If an aesthetics of existence is autonomous with respect to other spheres it can specify no normative judgements over the worth of specific actions. It can say that, formally, some action is aesthetically carried out, but it cannot add to this judgement that the content of the action is one to be approved or disapproved. As Eagleton rhetorically argues: 'What would a stylish rape look like?'[33] The only way Foucault can avoid this charge, another version of the accusation of normative neutrality, would be by shifting his definition of the aesthetic back to the 'Greek' version, arguing that the normative content of actions formally judged to be aesthetic would have to be derived from the social world in which the action occurred. The autonomy of the aesthetic would have to be surrendered in order to grant some normative force to judgements. Foucault clearly acknowledges that an aesthetics of existence must, in some way, be socially and historically determined. He writes that the 'care of the self', as the Romans called their aesthetics of existence, was 'not an exercise in solitude, but a true social practice' (3: 51). Elsewhere Foucault notes 'practices of the self' are not invented by the individual, but are 'patterns that he finds in his culture and which are proposed, suggested and imposed on him by his culture, his society and his social group'.[34] The normative element of the aesthetics of existence thus forms a sort of social backdrop to actions termed stylish, ruling out a priori certain actions from being worthy of this description. Again, such a situation would require a considerable rearrangement of the cognitive, moral and aesthetic realms as presently constituted. And it requires Foucault to surrender entirely the notion of autonomy as applied to aesthetic judgements.

III

Foucault is best known for the theory of power found in his earlier works. Power is everywhere, power is productive more than repressive, and the modern form of power is a 'disciplinary' one, an invisible capillary apparatus that produces truth, knowledge and individuals themselves. Disciplinary power, to borrow from Althusser, makes us 'work by ourselves' and has no distinct point of origin.[35] In volumes 2 and 3 of the *History of Sexuality* we encounter a similar account of power in the definition of the 'care of the self'. The way the Greek male subject formed a relationship to the self involved exercising power over himself.[36] Repeatedly this care is figured as a battle for control: it is 'an agonistic relationship with oneself' (2: 67); it is 'a domination of oneself by oneself' (2: 65); the relation to self required was of a 'command-obedience, mastery-docility' type (2: 70). Finally, in the conclusion to volume 2, Foucault describes how strategies for proper sexual conduct required 'the constitution of [a] self-disciplined subject' (2: 250). This is a subject not dissimilar from the self-disciplining prisoner in *Discipline and Punish*, watched by the gaze of the empty Panopticon. The question I want to pose here is simply this: why has Foucault's attitude to this form of 'disciplinary power' shifted, from a normatively neutral condemnation in *Discipline and Punish*, to a vague celebration of 'self-disciplining' as a rich source of aesthetic activity? Why is a type of power which insidiously disciplines individuals into making their lives works of art a practice now approved of by Foucault?

The reason for such a change in attitude can be located within a distinction Foucault draws between power and domination in an interview, 'The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom'. This is a normative distinction relying upon a sense of the autonomy of the aesthetic. Foucault argues 'relations of power are not something bad in themselves' and that he cannot imagine a society without relations of power.[37] Granted this is so, the individual must aim to 'give one's self the rules of law, the techniques of management, and also the ethics, the *ethos*, the practice of self, which would allow these games of power to be played with a minimum of domination'.[38] The freedom to conduct power over one's self (and others) is integral to Foucault's sense of power: 'there cannot be relations of power unless the subjects are free' and 'there are relations of power throughout every social field ... because there is freedom everywhere.'[39] Domination, for Foucault, is a state where power relations are reified: 'the relations of power are fixed in such a way that they are perpetually asymmetrical and the margin of liberty is extremely limited.'[40] If this definition of domination always offers a glimmer of hope, in another definition Foucault states the case more starkly:

> When an individual or a social group manages to block a field of relations of power, to render them impassive and invariable and to prevent all reversibility of movement – by means of instruments which can be economic as well as political or military – we are facing what can be called a state of domination.[41]

This stronger definition must be the one Foucault should uphold, since the weaker version, where liberty is only marginalised rather than 'blocked', blurs the distinction between power and domination. The distinction is already a tenuous one. Power is the 'means by which individuals try to conduct, to determine the behaviour of others'.[42] 'Determination' of the conduct of others is alleged to differ from 'domination' of others. This difference could only be an absolute one and not one of degrees. For if it were the latter, there would always be the possibility of 'determination' slipping into 'domination'. One person's 'domination' is another person's 'determination'.

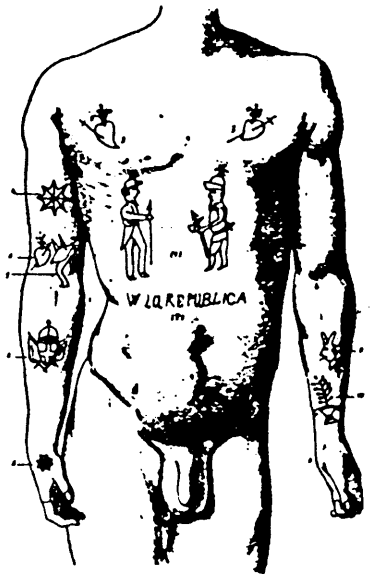
It is the concept of freedom which allows Foucault to make such a distinction, for relations of power, unlike relations of domination, are governed by the idea of freedom. This answers Charles Taylor's accusation that Foucault lacks a sense of freedom which would grant his theory of

power coherence.[43] It is clear from this interview with Foucault, however, that his definition of power-freedom derives from the Greco-Roman idea of the care of the self as an aesthetic/ethical practice. Care of the self, he argues, was the way individual liberty was seen as ethical.[44] This aesthetics of existence was 'the purposeful art of a freedom perceived as a power game' (2: 253). In this 'game', freedom 'was a power that one brought to bear on oneself' (2:80) as a contribution to the overall well-being of the Greek polis. This type of individual freedom is identified with the power to care for one's self: 'it was an enslavement – the enslavement of the self by oneself' (2: 79). But, just as there are problems in collapsing any contemporary ethics/aesthetics distinction in the light of the Greeks, so there are problems with what appears to be a collapsing of power into freedom. Our senses of these terms mean something more than freedom equals the ability to police oneself with vigour. Identifying power with aesthetics, and freedom with ethics, does not entail that we accept power to be identical with freedom.

Again we encounter the problem of reading the Greeks with reference to our own situation. How far is it possible to import the notion of 'freedom' from a society based on slavery to any contemporary society? If slaves were thought not to possess ethics then perhaps this meant they existed in states of domination.[45] Equally problematic is the gendering of the notion of freedom in the Greeks: 'mastery as active freedom' was attributed to a 'virile' character (2: 82). The Greek sense of power-freedom developed a male ethical subject whose aesthetics of existence was ruled by 'a structure of virility that related oneself to oneself' (2: 83). It could be argued that the Greek notions of freedom and care of self as ethical relied upon a clear separation of such selves from those social groups who were totally dominated. Freedom as care of self thus relied upon being distinguished from the practices of a group of dominated individuals. The theoretical distinction Foucault wishes to uphold between power and domination might only make sense in a Greek world. But Foucault's absolute approval of a spirit of 'freedom' seems haunted by the modern liberal ghost of autonomy. As with the confusion over the aesthetic, Foucault seems unable to clarify which sense of freedom he wants to endorse. Perhaps Foucault would wish to reject the Greek definition of freedom as 'self-enslavement', but retain the sense of freedom as an aesthetics of existence. But surely this would involve importing the Kantian notion of the autonomy of the aesthetic back into the definition. Foucault seems to transfer the idea of autonomy as applied to the aesthetic over into the notion of freedom or liberty that he finds in the Greeks. But this would make no sense to the undissociated aesthetics/ethics of the Greeks.

Power, for Foucault, seems to become the freedom to dominate oneself in an aesthetic manner.[46] This coalition of power and aesthetics raises two issues: 1. If Taylor is correct to assert that 'power needs targets'[47] to be a coherent concept, then what is the target for the aestheticisation of the self? 2. Is there a normative dimension to aesthetic power over the self, or rather how can we recognise when power over the self becomes domination over the self? The answer to the first question is the body, and by examining the relation of power to the body we raise some possible answers to the second question.

The body is the privileged locus of the operations of power for Foucault. *Discipline and Punish* proposes an intrinsic connection between the rise of disciplinary power and a new 'political investment of the body' in areas such as prisons, schooling and diet.[48] Power informs bodily features such as gestures, economies of movement and the overall exercise of the body. Power was aimed not so much at the result of bodily activities, but at 'the processes of the activity'. This results in 'an art of the human body', designed to produce 'docile' but 'useful' bodies.[49] Critics have indicated various problems with Foucault's privileging of the body as the object of political critique: his tendency to unify different bodies under the notion of 'the body'; the way he sees the body in almost metaphysical terms; and the loss incurred in reducing the complexities of human experiences to the crudely physiological.[50] However, Foucault's work has prompted much interesting work by others upon the relation of power to the body.



The corollary of Foucault's insistence on the disciplining of the body is that it becomes the privileged site of resistance to the operations of power, and it is this argument which comes to dominate in the later work. At the close of *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* Foucault proposes 'bodies and pleasures' as sources of resistance to the discourses of sex-desire, agents of disciplinary power.[51] Volumes 2 and 3 of *The History of Sexuality* often focuses upon those aesthetics of existence – diet, digestion, exercise and bathing – which exemplify self-imposed acts of power over the body. These are no longer docile bodies, but exhaustingly active ones, engaged in the *askesis* of Greek ethical training (2: 72-77). Greek and Greco-Roman conceptions of the soul are subordinate to the body when Foucault discusses care of the self. Attitudes towards homosexuality were ruled by 'a whole moral aesthetics of the boy's body' (2: 200). The entire regime surrounding sexual pleasures, argues Foucault, 'seems to be centered entirely

on the body.... It is as if the body dictated to the body' (3: 133). The soul did not fight the desires of the body, rather it controlled itself so as to guide the body, but only 'according to a law which is that of the body itself' (3: 134). The soul usurps this role only with the rise of Christianity in the fourth century (3: 239).

Power as Foucault theorises it in relation to the Greeks is the principle of a free self-aestheticisation, directed primarily at the body. Could this principle be utilised as part of the resistance to the contemporary disciplining of the body?[52] Again, I want to argue that such a tactic involves normative problems for Foucault's version of an aesthetics of existence. This can be shown by considering some feminist appropriations of Foucauldian theory.

A number of feminist theorists have developed Foucault's political analysis of the body to produce accounts of how the female body is 'disciplined' in contemporary Western societies.[53] Writers such as Susan Bordo, Sandra Lee Bartkey and Moya Lloyd have focused upon phenomena such as regimes of diet, exercise and eating disorders as examples of disciplines self-imposed on the female body.[54] Inspection and regulation of the body for size, shape, appetite, posture and gesture offers the opportunity, argues Bordo, for women to experience the feeling of being in control of their bodies. Such body-disciplines as body-building offer 'a fantasy of self-mastery'.[55] Care of the self for women in relation to their bodies clearly resembles Foucault's Greek aesthetics of existence. Bordo quotes from one fitness magazine exhorting women: 'Create a masterpiece. Sculpt your body contours into a work of art.' Or from another: 'It's up to you to do the chiselling; you become the master sculptress.'[56]

In this feminist work on the gendered body there is no sense of the cool endorsement of such practices of the self found in Foucault's work on the Greeks. If aerobics or dieting are examples of contemporary aesthetic self-fashioning, displaying the rigours of self-disciplining, then there are good reasons, grounded in normative judgements about the social position of women, for why feminists have wanted to be critical of these freely-chosen exercises of aesthetic power. Self-aestheticisation of the female body might be described as 'a principle of stylization of conduct for those who wished to give their existence the most graceful and accomplished form possible' (2: 250-1). But it could also be the case, as Bartkey argues, that this 'self-surveillance is a form of obedience to patriarchy'.[57] To choose between these interpretations would presuppose some set of normative criteria. For, as Roy Boyne argues, Foucault's notion of the care of the self is a 'mechanism without a rule for its application' and, furthermore, 'Without a normative regime, we cannot determine the essential parameters of self-discipline.'[58] Female practices of the self carried out on the body might be described, in Foucault's terms, not as operations of power, but as closer to states of domination. For practices such as dieting to be described as power, not domination, it must be possible to employ what Foucault terms 'strategic reversals' of the prevailing relations of power.[59] It is formally possible to envisage that dieting could be strategically reversed, and the exercise of powerful self-fashioning be one of eating and aestheticising one's bodysize as a sort of 'controlled expansion'. But this would be to ignore the social networks of power-relations which effectively block and disallow such a project. This is because of the normative judgements, grounded in social institutions, cultural values and gender inequalities, which only, at present, applaud certain aestheticisations of the body: those in line with the so-called 'tyranny of slenderness'.[60] An aesthetic of power, just as much as the power of aesthetics, requires more than simply a principle of absolute freedom or the rule of an empty autonomy.

IV

Recent discussions of the fate of the project of Enlightenment have seemed to return to one of the founding concerns of Enlightenment rationality: the establishment of a corpus of knowledge around questions of aesthetics. Lyotard allies himself with Kant's *Critique of Judgement*: 'the Kant of the imagination, the one who recovered from the sickness of knowledge and rules and converted to the paganism of art and nature'.[61] Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989) maps out a 'liberal utopia', in terms of a world where poetry as 'self-creation' is triumphant over philosophy as 'discovery'.[62] For Rorty, Enlightenment rationality impedes rather than underpins democratic societies and only by utilising a language drawn from the aesthetic realm of metaphor and self-creation can democracy be guaranteed. A 'liberal utopia', argues Rorty, 'would be a *poeticized* culture'.[63] From a rather different position on the political spectrum, Terry Eagleton's *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990) traces the development of modern aesthetic theory from the eighteenth century to the present. Eagleton argues for a rigorously dialectical analysis of aesthetics: 'The aesthetic is ... a vision of human energies as radical ends in themselves. ... it offers a generous utopian image of reconciliation between men and women at present divided from one another, [but] it also blocks and mystifies the real political movement towards such historical community.'[64] The aesthetic has a radically ambiguous but important relation to political projects.

Foucault's late work on Greco-Roman sexuality fits into this rediscovery of the question of aesthetics by contemporary thinkers. As I have argued, if such work simply tries to substitute a concept of aesthetics, whether Greek or Kantian, for Enlightenment rationality, then there are grave problems with such a manoeuvre.[65] However, if the aim and result is a rethinking of the relation between the spheres of knowledge, morals and aesthetics, then Foucault's work may usefully contribute, with qualifications, to such a debate. His work might function as what he terms a 'problematization' of the question of the aesthetic.[66] Read in this light, Foucault's texts would contain no programmatic description of an aesthetically tempered ethical and rational realm. It would differ in this respect from Lyotard's endorsement of a politics devoted to narrative pragmatics.[67] Foucault's work thus becomes 'empty', devoid of a content which would specify what 'the aesthetic' means today. The only currently possible contents for the term, those of either the Greeks or of Kant, are clearly unacceptable.

Foucault's attention to Greek aesthetics of existence then becomes part of his 'historical ontology of ourselves'.[68]

We reconsider the question of the contemporary scope and role of the aesthetic by examining the 'limits' of 'the events that have led us to constitute ourselves' today.[69] That is, the conceptual limits of our present arrangement of cognitive, moral and aesthetic realms. This historical inquiry then has to be hauled into the present-day, it must 'put itself to the test of reality, of contemporary reality, both to grasp the points where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take'.[70] It is at this point that Foucault's pronouncements leave the detached problematization of the limits of our forms of thought, a gesture akin to an aesthetic 'disinterested delight', and enter the more problematic realm of specifying a contemporary content and role for the aesthetic. Foucault's aesthetics of existence contains, as I have shown, a number of ambiguities and difficulties. This aestheticisation of life ignores – and this is one point where precise change in the present might start – an initial stage of transformation. The call for 'everyone's life to become a work of art' contains a crucial ambiguity. Either making one's life into a work of art could mean a reification: art and life as an aesthetic object. Or, aestheticising one's life could refer to a process: living and acting according to some set of aesthetic criteria. The first possibility indicates the current state of most objects termed aesthetic. Its values are those of the commodity. However, the present task facing the aesthetic is to disengage itself from commodified values. One's life could only be termed 'aesthetic' if there was a prior freeing of art objects from the values of the commodity. In other words, it would be difficult to imagine living a fulfilling and 'aesthetic' life, unless art objects themselves sustained such an existence. Putting the notion of the aesthetic to the test of contemporary reality should involve a truer recognition of the current status of art and aesthetics. This Foucault fails to provide. But such a project has much to learn from his revelation of a world, that of the Greeks, with a very different role for aesthetic judgements.

Foucault welcomes the prospect of returning aesthetics from the autonomy of art-objects to the self-creative capacities of individuals. The problem with this, which he sometimes ignores in the golden glow of Greek culture, is a question he himself poses: 'How can the growth of capabilities be disconnected from the intensification of power relations?'[71] Oddly enough, aesthetics for Foucault functions in a utopian manner, paralleling Rorty and Eagleton, proleptically indicating a world of human capacities 'disconnected' from power (or domination), or at least a world where human subjects have become reconnected to power in a more positive and fulfilling fashion. There are, as I have suggested, many difficulties with Foucault on aesthetics, but this is not to dismiss it for utopianism. As Oscar Wilde once remarked: 'A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth glancing at.'[72] Perhaps the main problem with Foucault's map is that it is a Greek one.

Notes

1 Michel Foucault, *L'Usage des plaisirs* (1984); *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality Volume 2*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1986), and *Le souci de soi* (1984); *The Care of the Self: The History of Sexuality Volume 3*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1988). Future references will be to the English versions and given in the main body of the text, by volume and page number.

2 Peter Dews, 'The Return of the Subject in Late Foucault', *Radical Philosophy*, No. 51 (Spring 1989), p. 37.

3 Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p. 29.

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

5 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), pp. 135-169.

6 Michel Foucault, 'The Concern for Truth', in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), p. 263.

7 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), Part 1, #2, pp. 43-44.

8 For a good survey see Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), specifically pp. 47-54, for the failure of the avant-garde in the twentieth century to heal the divide between society and the aesthetic.

9 Foucault, 'On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress', in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 341.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 348.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 341.

12 Dews, 'Late Foucault', p. 40.

13 Foucault thus disagrees with Nietzsche's argument about the rise of Christian asceticism in *The Genealogy of Morals*, as he makes clear in 'On the Genealogy of Ethics', p. 366.

14 Roy Boyne has an interesting – although not entirely convincing – argument that Foucault's later work shows a commitment to a version of a Kantian categorical imperative. See Boyne, *Foucault and Derrida: The Other Side of Reason* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), pp. 2, 166-168.

15 Kant, *Critique*, #22, p. 84.

16 Foucault, 'Genealogy of Ethics', p. 343 and 'The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom', interview in *The Final Foucault*, ed. James Bernauer and David Rasmussen (London/Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), p. 14.

17 Foucault, 'Genealogy of Ethics', p. 343.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 350.

19 Bürger, *Avant-Garde*, p. 49.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 57. Also see Bürger, 'Aporias of Modern Aesthetics', *New Left Review*, No. 184 (Nov/Dec 1990), pp. 55-56.

21 Foucault, 'An Aesthetics of Existence', *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, p. 49. Julia Kristeva makes similar claims about the disintegration of older forms of morality and the need for a new ethics. See *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 211, 185.

22 Foucault's point here is something of a non-sequitur. If he is drawing parallels between the transition from a personal ethics (Antiquity) to moral codes (Christianity), and a contemporary shift away from moral codes, then there is no reason to believe that the next stage will be a reinstatement of personalised Greek ethical/aesthetic principles.

23 For a clear argument against Foucault's normative neutrality see Charles Taylor, 'Foucault on Freedom and Truth', *Political Theory*, 12: 2 (May 1984), pp. 152-183. For a similar critique see Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices*, chapter 1.

24 Derek D. Nikolinakos, 'Foucault's Ethical Quandary', *Telos*, No. 83 (Spring 1990), p. 125.

25 Kant, *Critique*, #32, p. 137. On this aspect of the aesthetic see Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil

Blackwell, 1990), pp. 9, 367.

26 Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity – An Incomplete Project', in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (London: Pluto, 1985), pp. 11-12. For a comparison of Habermas and Foucault on aesthetics see Stephen K. White, *The Recent Work of Jürgen Habermas Reason, Justice and Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 144-54. White argues that, while Habermas's work on aesthetics is underdeveloped, Foucault's aesthetics of existence has some merits but prevents access to 'intersubjective otherness' (p. 151) and is thus too solipsistic. This, as I argue, is not entirely true of Foucault's account of an aesthetics of existence which contains an important social dimension.

27 Richard Wolin, 'Foucault's Aesthetic Decisionism', *Telos*, No. 67 (Spring 1986), pp. 71-110.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 79.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 84. Foucault rejects the accusation that his aesthetics would necessarily lead to this sort of gross egoism. See Foucault, 'The Ethic of Care for the Self', *Final Foucault*, p. 8.

30 Foucault, 'The Concern for Truth', p. 259.

31 Wolin, 'Foucault's Aesthetic Decisionism', pp. 85, 84.

32 Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, p. 393. A similar point about the contentless nature of Foucault's ethics is made by Roy Boyne, *Foucault and Derrida*, p. 149 and Charles Taylor, 'Foucault on Freedom and Truth', p. 168. Foucault seems to have distinguished his position from his earlier assertion that, 'For modern thought, no morality is possible.' See *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock, 1970), p. 328.

33 Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, p. 394.

34 Foucault, 'The Ethic of Care for the Self', p. 11. The socially determined nature of supposedly autonomous acts of self-creation is commented on by Stephen Greenblatt in his *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 256. Foucault acknowledges Greenblatt's work as a recent version of a history of the aesthetics of existence (2: 11).

35 For an elaboration of disciplinary power see Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 170-228 and *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), *passim*. For a critical summary of the notion see Fraser, *Unruly Practices*, p. 18.

36 Deleuze comments that Foucault's idea of care of the self is 'a dimension of subjectivity derived from power and knowledge without being dependent on them'. Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Sean Hand (London: Athlone Press, 1988), p. 101.

37 Foucault, 'The Ethic of Care for the Self', p. 18.

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

40 *Ibid.*

41 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

43 Taylor, 'Foucault on Freedom and Truth', pp. 172-73. For a positive assessment of the concept of freedom in Foucault's philosophy see John Rajchman, *Michel Foucault The Freedom of Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

44 Foucault, 'The Ethic of Care for the Self', p. 4.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

46 A point made by Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, pp. 388-90.

47 Taylor, 'Foucault on Freedom and Truth', p. 172.

48 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 139.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 138.

50 See Jeffrey Minson, *Genealogies of Morals Nietzsche, Foucault, Donzelot and the Eccentricity of Ethics* (London: Macmillan, 1985), pp. 76-97; Fraser, *Unruly Practices*, p. 61; Gillian Rose, *Dialectic of Nihilism: Post-Structuralism and the Law* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), p. 180; Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, p. 395.

51 Foucault, *History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, p. 157.

52 One problem with Foucault's insistence on defining aesthetics of existence in relation to the body is whether, once more, this is appropriate for a contemporary situation. This intimate link of body and aesthetic, as Eagleton has comprehensively shown, is one which, since the eighteenth century, we have learned to live without as part of the post-Kantian arrangement of cognitive realms. Reuniting them is no simple task, and would certainly involve more than merely reviving their Greek heritage. See Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, p. 7 and *passim*.

53 For feminist appropriations of Foucault see *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, eds. Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988); Jana Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power, and the Body* (New York/London: Routledge, 1991) and Terry K. Aladjem, 'The Philosopher's Prism: Foucault, Feminism and Critique', *Political Theory*, 19: 2 (May 1991), pp. 277-291. For a more critical assessment see Isaac D. Balbus, 'Disciplining Women: Michel Foucault and the Power of Feminist Discourse', *Praxis International*, 5: 4 (1985), pp. 466-83; and Nancy Harstock, 'Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?' in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).

54 Susan Bordo, 'Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathology as the Crystallization of Culture' and Sandra Lee Bartkey, 'Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power' in *Feminism and Foucault*, eds. Diamond and Quinby; Moya Lloyd, 'Disciplinary Power: Foucault, Feminism and the Female Body', paper presented at the Feminist Theory Conference: An International Debate, University of Glasgow, July 1991.

55 Bordo, 'Anorexia Nervosa', p. 100.

56 *Ibid.*, p. 99.

57 Bartkey, 'Foucault, Femininity and Patriarchal Power', p. 81. Foucault would, I believe, reject the notion of patriarchy as a structure which underlies and guarantees disciplinary power as a false universalism. This seems one issue to which some feminist writers on Foucault have not paid sufficient attention.

58 Boyne, *Foucault and Derrida*, pp. 167, 149.

59 Foucault, 'The Ethic of Care for the Self', pp. 12, 3.

60 The title of a book by Kim Chernin, *Womansize: The Tyranny of Slenderness* (London: Women's Press, 1983). For this reason Sawicki calls for a feminist use of Foucault which retains traditional types of normative criteria. See Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault*, pp. 100-102.

61 Jean-François Lyotard, 'Lessons in Paganism', *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 133.

62 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 40.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

64 Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, p. 9.

65 Indeed Foucault points to the dangers of an element in postmodern thought which views 'Reason' as an enemy. See Foucault, 'Space, Knowledge, and Power', *Foucault Reader*, pp. 248-49.

66 For this notion see Foucault, 'Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations', *Foucault Reader*, pp. 388-90.

67 See Lyotard, 'Lessons in Paganism'.

68 Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?', *Foucault Reader*, p. 45.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 46.

70 *Ibid.*

71 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

72 Oscar Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism', *Complete Works* (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1966), p. 1089.