


# A critical consideration of Foucault's conceptualisation of morality

**Author:**Augusta B. Hofmeyr<sup>1</sup> **Affiliation:**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Philosophy,  
Faculty of Humanities,  
University of Pretoria,  
Pretoria, South Africa

**Corresponding author:**

Augusta Hofmeyr,  
benda.hofmeyr@up.ac.za

**Dates:**

Received: 19 Feb. 2023

Accepted: 03 Oct. 2023

Published: 22 Jan. 2024

**How to cite this article:**

Hofmeyr, A.B., 2024, 'A critical consideration of Foucault's conceptualisation of morality', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 45(1), a2830. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v45i1.2830>

**Copyright:**

© 2024. The Author.  
Licensee: AOSIS. This work  
is licensed under the  
Creative Commons  
Attribution License.

The background of this research is the status and significance of an ethics of care of the self in the history of morality. I followed the following methodology: I attempted to come to nuanced, critical understanding of the Foucault's conceptualisation of morality in Volumes II and III of *The History of Sexuality*. In the 'Ancients', Foucault uncovered an 'ethics-oriented' as opposed to a 'code-oriented' morality in which the emphasis shifted to how an individual was supposed to constitute himself as an ethical subject of his own action without denying the importance of either the moral code or the actual behaviour of people. The main question was whether care of the self-sufficiently regulated an individual's conduct towards others to prevent the self from lapsing into narcissism, substituting a generous responsiveness towards the other for a means-end rationale. I put this line of critique to test by confronting Foucault's care of the self with Levinas's primordial responsibility towards the other and put forward a case for the indispensability of aesthetics for ethics. In conclusion, I defended the claim that care of the self does indeed foster other responsiveness.

**Intradisciplinary and interdisciplinary implications:** Foucault's ethics, understood as an 'aesthetics of existence' has profound intradisciplinary and interdisciplinary implications, as it challenges traditional ethical normative ethical theories and engages with various fields of philosophy, social sciences and humanities. Interdisciplinary fields greatly influenced by Foucault's ethics include: psychology, literary, cultural, gender and sexuality studies, medical ethics, anthropology and history, among others.

**Keywords:** Foucault; care of the self; ethics; morality; aesthetics of existence; Levinas; responsibility for the other.

## Introduction: An 'ethics-oriented' rather than a 'code-oriented' morality

Foucault develops his 'moral philosophy' in the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality*. Whereas the first volume laid bare the *objectification* of the self by the tactics of power at work in the 18th century valorisation of discourse on sex (HS I, 23/33, 70/93–94), the second and third volumes return to Antiquity to discover possibilities for *subjectivisation*, that is, the relation that the self establishes with itself by which it recreates its subject identity and creates some distance from the forces that objectify and subjectify it. Foucault's preoccupation with the past was an attempt to find in the ancient self's relation to itself or ethics indications of how practices of freedom might be possible today (Foucault 1984:4).

According to Foucault, the task of a history of thought is 'to define the conditions in which human beings 'problematise' what they are, what they do, and the world in which they live' (Foucault 1984: 4). In Greek and Greco-Roman culture, this problematisation is directly tied to the 'arts of existence': those deliberate actions – freely and voluntarily undertaken by individuals – to set for themselves rules of conduct, but also to transform their life into a work of art (HS II, 10–11/16–17; Foucault 1983:350). For Foucault, conceiving of ethics as an 'aesthetics' does not mean that ethics is reduced to a matter of superficial appearances or aesthetic taste. Rather, it underscores the idea that ethics involves creative practices of self-discipline, self-examination and self-transformation. Just as artists use techniques and practices to create art, individuals employ techniques to create their ethical selves. This characterisation of ethics, as we shall see, challenges traditional moral philosophies, and opens up new avenues for thinking about the nature of ethical subjectivity and practice.

**Note:** Special Collection: Morality in history.

**Read online:**

Scan this QR  
code with your  
smart phone or  
mobile device  
to read online.

In the course of this study, Foucault was led 'to substitute a history of ethical problematisations based on practices of the self, for a history of systems of morality based, hypothetically, on interdictions' (HS II, 13/19). The Church and the pastoral ministry stressed the principle of a morality based on compulsory universal precepts. In classical thought, on the other hand, the demands of austerity were not organised into a unified, coherent, authoritarian moral system that was imposed universally and uniformly; they served more to supplement the commonly accepted morality. These themes of austerity did not *impose* but *proposed* different styles of moderation and also did not coincide with the limits established by the great social, civil and religious interdictions.

Classical moral reflection did not inhibit men's conduct by way of prohibitions, but incited them to exercise and affirm their rights, privilege, potential and autonomy by way of the stylisation of their conduct as a practice of liberty within the bounds of austerity (HS II, 23/30).

## Morality and/or ethics?

The shift of emphasis from the codification to the stylisation of conduct tempts one to project the Hegelian distinction between 'morality' [*Moralität*] and 'ethics' [*Sittlichkeit*] into the later Foucault's thinking. 'Morality' would then refer to the fundamental questions of right and wrong and *moral* principles would be those which are universally valid and, as such, are obligatory for all human beings. The terms 'ethics' and 'ethical' would have bearing on empirically ascertainable norms of conduct which are specific to particular societies at particular times, and hence to the common good or collective self-interest of their individual members, rather than on any rationally apprehensible, universally valid principles which apply to or within all societies at all times. The latter would fall within the purview of morality rather than that of ethics. One might even agree that in Foucault one finds a distinction between morality and ethics that coincides with the Habermasian distinction. According to Habermas, 'what is being asked [*in ethical questions*] is whether a maxim is good for me', whereas in the case of moral questions, what is being asked is 'whether I can will that a maxim should be followed by *everyone* as a general law' (Habermas 1993:7, 116–117).<sup>1</sup>

Foucault's own vocabulary is often indiscriminate. What exactly is Foucault referring to when he undertakes to study the forms and transformations of a 'morality'? Is it different from his genealogy of 'ethics'? In an interview in 1983 titled, 'On the genealogy of ethics', Foucault (1983) defines ethics as:

[T]he kind of relationship you ought to have with yourself, *rappor à soi* ... which determines how the individual is supposed to constitute himself as a moral subject of his own actions. (p. 352)

1. In this regard, see "On the pragmatic, the ethical and the moral employments of practical reason" (pp. 1–18) and "Lawrence Kohlberg and Neo-Aristotelians" (pp. 113–132) in Habermas (1993).

The interview title is reminiscent of Nietzsche's *Toward a genealogy of morals*, but of course, Nietzsche used the German word, *Moral* [*Zur Genealogie der Moral*]. Kant's titles, on the other hand, uses the word *Sitte*, which we translate as 'ethics'. The German word, *Sitten* refers to customs and practices, which is different from morality, that is, conduct which accords with a prescriptive system of rules that distinguishes between right and wrong. What interested Foucault was *Sitten* much more than *Moral* (cf. Hacking 1984).

Over and above the 'moral code', Foucault maintains that 'morality' also consists in the real behaviour of individuals in relation to the rules and values that they are supposed to adhere to. What is relevant here is how and with what measure of variation or transgression do individuals or groups conduct themselves in relation to a prescriptive system that is explicitly or implicitly operative in their culture. This is what Foucault refers to as 'the morality of behaviours' (HS II, 26/33).

The 'moral code' is thus composed of 'interdictions and codes' and can be analysed formally and independently of any effective behaviour. The 'morality of behaviours', on the other hand, refers to the 'actual behaviour' of individuals, and can only be evaluated, *a posteriori*, by reference to the 'prescriptive set' circumscribed by the moral code. Although there is no explicit reference to Kant, Foucault is here obviously transposing the distinction – established in the *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* – between the moral law and actions that may or may not conform to it (Han 2002:158; Kant 1785:52–54). Like Kant before him, Foucault denies that morality could be understood solely by reference to the actions carried out, and therefore rejects 'actual behaviour' as being *inframoral*.<sup>2</sup> Morality must be defined, not by the conformity of the action with the code, but in reference to the intention and the freedom of the subject, and thus, ultimately, to the way in which the will determines itself. '[F]or what is morality, if not the practice of liberty, the deliberate practice of liberty?', Foucault (1984:4) asks.<sup>3</sup> However, the difference between Foucault and Kant lies in their respective conceptions of the 'practice of freedom'. For Kant, it is respect for the law alone that allows us to decide the morality of an action.<sup>4</sup> Foucault, on the other hand, repeatedly stresses that the Greeks had very few prohibitions and strict adherence to these was never an object of great moral concern. What was important was the necessity of the subject determining and expressing, not only his will, but also his way of being through action. Thus, in clear opposition

2. "Setting aside" all actions "contrary to duty" as well as those which are "in conformity with duty but to which human beings have *no inclination* immediately" (Kant 1785:52, emphasis in the original), Kant concludes his analysis of those for whom there exists an "immediate inclination": To preserve one's life, for example, is a duty, but everybody also has an immediate inclination to do so. To look after one's life is thus *in conformity with duty* but not *from duty*. "[I]n such a case an action of this kind, however it may conform with duty and however amiable it may be, has nevertheless no true moral worth ... for the maxim lacks moral content, namely that of doing such actions not from inclination but *from duty*" (p. 53, emphasis in the original).

3. Foucault also shares with Kant the idea that moral behaviour presupposes a rational conception of action (the "reflective form", the "reflective practice"), which leaves any action determined by sensible inclination outside the moral field.

4. See Kant (1785:55, emphasis in the original): "[A]n action from duty has its moral worth *not in the purpose* to be attained by it but in the maxim in accordance with which it is decided upon ... *duty is the necessity of an action from respect for law*".

to the subject's subjection to the law, characteristic of the Judeo-Christian understanding of morality, Foucault advocates an ethics that can be defined from the 'conduct' of the individual – the way in which he gives 'deliberate form' to his liberty (Foucault 1984:4).

Han (2002:159) points out that Foucault herewith implicitly takes up the traditional distinction between act-centred morality and agent-centred ethics. Those who emphasise the act, understand the virtuous action by referring it to a set of pre-established prescriptions, while those who emphasise the agent, on the contrary, attach little importance to 'duty' and define virtue itself from the conduct that a virtuous man adopts.

Foucault therefore supersedes the Kantian opposition between codes and actions, by introducing a third level concerned with the way in which one ought to 'conduct oneself' – 'that is, the manner in which one ought to form oneself as an ethical subject acting in reference to the prescriptive elements that make up the code' (HS II, 26/33).<sup>5</sup> Given the code of conduct and various ways in which individuals conduct themselves, which can be defined by their degree of conformity with or divergence from the code, there are different ways to 'conduct oneself' morally. How I ought to act then also becomes a matter of how I choose to act, which should not be mistaken for voluntarism since the choice reflects an entire mode of being – what Aristotle called a virtuous character associated with *hexis* – an active condition that requires vigilant attention and the discerning application of the virtues in each different situation.

## Ethics understood as the self's relationship to itself

Foucault thought of ethics proper, of the self's relationship to itself, as having four main aspects:

- The *ethical substance* [*substance éthique*] is that part of oneself that is taken to be the relevant domain for ethical judgement. For the Christians, it was desire, for example, and for Kant, it was intentions. For the Greeks, when a philosopher was in love with a boy, but did not touch him, his behaviour was valued. For them, the ethical substance consisted in the *act* linked with pleasure and desire, and not in pleasure or desire as such.
- The *mode of subjection* [*mode d'assujettissement*] refers to the way in which the individual establishes his or her relation to moral obligations and rules. How do people come to recognise their moral obligations? Which authority do you subject yourself to when you act morally? Is it, for example, divine law or a religious interdict revealed in a text, or is it natural law, a cosmological order or perhaps

5. Kant's transcendental approach clearly excludes the necessity and even the possibility of taking into account the agent's mode of being, which can only be defined empirically and *a posteriori*. Foucault thus diverges from Kant by stressing that the Greeks would not have defined morality independently of the quality of the moral agent and would not have defined this quality independently of his actions. It is not intention alone that decides the moral value of an action. Intention cannot be examined on its own without taking the mode of being of the agent into account. This is not definable *a priori*, but is the result of the constitution of the subject by itself (Han 2002:159).

a rational rule respected as universal? It might be compliance to a social convention or custom or the aspiration to give your existence the most beautiful form possible. The mode of subjection links the moral code to the self, determining the code's hold on the self.

- The *self-forming activity* or *ethical work* [*pratique de soi*] is that which one performs on oneself, not only in order to bring one's conduct into compliance with a given rule, but also to attempt to transform oneself into an ethical subject. Sexual austerity, for example, can be the result of a long process of assimilating a systematic ensemble of precepts, or of a sudden, all-embracing, and definitive renunciation of pleasures, or it could be practised in the form of a relentless struggle against passions that tend to become excessive. Foucault also calls this aspect *l'ascétisme* – asceticism in a very broad sense. Potential avenues of being or acting are closed off to serve some immediate end.
- Finally, the *telos* refers to the kind of being to which we aspire when we behave ethically. An action is not only moral taken on its own, but also as part of a pattern of conduct. A moral action tends towards its own accomplishment, but also beyond it towards the establishment of an overarching mode of being characteristic of the ethical subject (HS II, 26–28/33–35). For instance, do we want to attain purity, immortality, freedom or self-mastery? Therefore, action itself can only make sense within the global perspective of the ethical determination of the self in which it is inscribed and which it helps to form. As Foucault explains, it is an 'element and an aspect of [*the ethical subject's*] conduct, and it marks a stage in its becoming, a possible advance in its continuity' (HS II, 28/35; modified).

Again, we are here reminded of Aristotle's thesis that virtue is perfected by its own use, demanding from the agent a permanent actualisation that ultimately will make it habitual. Indeed, the idea that action determines a 'mode of being characteristic of the moral subject' clearly evokes Aristotle's definition of *hexis* as a 'state of character' or a 'relatively permanent disposition' progressively acquired through the repetition of specific actions, as *The Nicomachean ethics* says:

Moral virtue comes about as a result of habit ... For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them, e.g. men become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts. (Aristotle 1980:28–29 [1103<sup>a</sup> 11–33])

The act does not completely disappear in its being effected but subsists by leaving its trace in the subject's potentiality as an *hexis* (Foucault 1984:131 [1136<sup>b</sup> 32–1137<sup>a</sup> 20]; pp. 156–158 [1144<sup>b</sup> 1–1145<sup>a</sup> 11]). In this way, the modification of being that Foucault speaks about can only occur through the deliberate and reflective repetition of certain actions judged to be virtuous, which in the passage from the quantitative to the qualitative slowly transforms the *ethos* of the individual.

The self's relationship to itself can also be understood in terms of *poiesis* – the Greek term for creation or production,

which unlike mere action [*praxis*] or doing, is aimed at an end [*telos*].<sup>6</sup> This, however, does not mean that Foucault is proposing a teleological ethic. The *telos* consists in change, in transforming oneself into an ethical subject – the precise form of which is not known or determinable beforehand. Instead of the *telos* determining the production, it is the production process itself that determines the end product. Ultimately, it is the process of sculpting itself, the skilful taking away and shaping of the raw material, that determines the final sculpture.

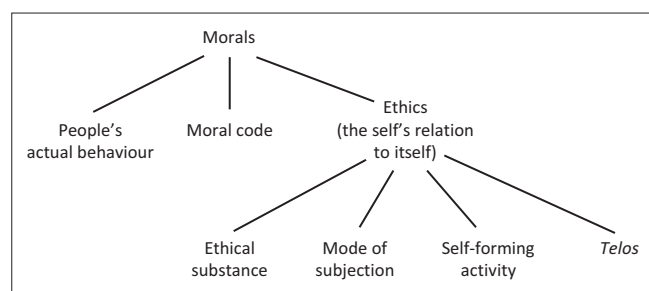
Therefore, when Foucault speaks of morals, he refers to the effective behaviour of people, the codes, and the kind of relationship one establishes with oneself based on the four aspects mentioned above (cf. Foucault 1983:352–355; ed. Gutting 1994:118; HS II, 26–32/33–39; ed. Hoy 1986:228–229, 237–238). Arnold Davidson's schematic representation of Foucault's understanding of morals (Figure 1) is useful in this regard (ed. Hoy 1986:229).

For Foucault, ethics is thus one part of the study of morals. In shifting the emphasis to how an individual is supposed to constitute himself as an ethical subject of his own actions, he was not, however, denying the importance of either the moral code or the actual behaviour of people.

'Moral' action cannot simply be reduced to an act or a series of acts confirming to some law or value. All moral action entails both a relationship with the reality in which it is carried out and a relationship with the self. This relationship with the self cannot simply be reduced to conscious knowledge of one's own character, motives, and desires. It is an active relationship of self-formation as an 'ethical subject'. Foucault describes this process of self-formation as that:

[I]n which the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the precept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal. And this requires him to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself. (HS II, 28/35)

Every moral action refers to a unified moral conduct; and every moral conduct calls for the formation of the self as an



Source: Hoy, D.C. (ed.), 1986, Foucault. A critical reader, Basil Blackwell, Ltd., Oxford

**FIGURE 1:** Schematic representation of Foucault's understanding of morals.

<sup>6</sup>Judith Butler (2000:214) briefly mentions *poiesis* in relation to Foucault's conception of self-making.

ethical subject. Moreover, the formation of the ethical subject always entails 'modes of subjectivation' and an 'ascetics' or 'practices of the self' that support them. Moral action is indissociable from these forms of self-activity which differ from one morality to another as do the systems of values, rules and interdictions. This is something other than a morality that simply relies on a law of prohibition to authenticate it. Ethics as self-formation, that is, as *aesthetics*, consists in the constant possibility of transgressing those laws that serve as supplement to a process that is always *more* than the mere rules, norms, or values that serve as a guideline for action. Importantly, transgression here does not mean non-observance. Instead of mere subjugation to the moral code, it entails the considered incorporation of a self-adopted code in the deliberate stylisation of conduct as a process of subjectivisation.

The history of 'morality' thus covers not only 'moral behaviours' and 'codes' but also the way in which individuals are urged to constitute themselves as subjects of ethical conduct. The last would be concerned with the proposed models for cultivating certain relationships with the self, for self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-examination, for the decipherment of the self by oneself, for the transformations that one aims to accomplish taking oneself as object. Foucault calls this 'a history of "ethics" or "ascetics," understood as a history of the forms of moral subjectivation and of the practices of self that is meant to ensure it' (HS II, 29/36). When the practices of the self are described in terms of the Greek *askēsis* (asceticism), it refers to self-discipline and moderation and not to the Christian sense of self-renunciation and rejection of all forms of indulgence (cf. HS II, 72–77/84–90; HS III, 43/57). The virtues in Aristotle, for example, are themselves exemplars of moderation – the golden mean between excess and deficiency as courage is the golden mean between cowardice and foolhardiness. The purpose of the complex exercises that made up *askēsis*, was not to deny all pleasure and worldly delights – sex, food, or ambition – but to avoid excess. Asceticism is not the suppression of pleasure, but its regulation; the aim is not denunciation, but optimal satisfaction.

According to the second and third volumes of *Histoire de la sexualité*, moral conceptions in Greek and Greco-Roman antiquity were concerned with the practices of the self and not with the demarcation of right and wrong. With the exception of the *Republic* and the *Laws*, one finds very few references to anything like a moral code. There is consequently also hardly any mention of the need for an authority charged with seeing to its application or for punishments sanctioning infractions. Admittedly, respect for the law and the customs – the *nomoi* – was considered of the utmost importance. However, far more important than the content of the law and its conditions of application was the attitude that caused one to respect them. The emphasis was on:

[T]he relationship with the self that enabled a person to keep from being carried away by the appetites and pleasures, to

maintain a mastery ... over them, ... to remain free from interior bondage to the passions, and to achieve a mode of being that could be defined by the full enjoyment of oneself, or the perfect supremacy of oneself over oneself. (HS II, 31/38)

According to Foucault's Greeks, ethics as self-stylisation implied an active vigilance: a self, able to constantly struggle against those forces within threatening to enslave, exploit and overpower it. There is no one turning point or victory, but a constant battle of the self against itself. It is a:

[C]hoice ... a willingness to give one's life a certain form. A matter of style, as it were: an individual is called upon to temper his conduct in terms of the mastery he intends to bring to bear on himself, and in terms of the moderation with which he aims to exercise his mastery over others. (HS II, 182/201)

For Foucault, then, freedom is both a *condition* that enables individuals to engage in ethical reflection and resistance to power, and it is a *telos* that guides the ongoing process of self-creation and self-transformation within an ethical framework. On the one hand, individuals need a degree of critical distance from existing norms and power structures to engage in ethical questioning and self-reflection. On the other hand, freedom is also the *telos* or goal of ethics in the sense that individuals aim to exercise their freedom to actively shape their ethical identities. This view of freedom challenges the idea of a fixed, universally applicable moral code and emphasises the dynamic and contingent nature of ethical subjectivity.

## The ethicality of self-creation questioned

To what extent is caring for the self actually *ethical*? Foucault's own conceptualisation of ethics allows one to distinguish two criteria for ethicality. According to him, as we have seen, an action is ethical if it secures and maintains increased freedom for an individual. However, as such, increased freedom is not necessarily ethical. It only becomes ethical when it is practised in a *deliberate* fashion and given *deliberate* form. In other words, what do we *do* with our freedom? How do we *use* it to form our subjectivity? If the power-defined individual is more than a distinct singularity, how he or she uses his or her freedom will necessarily affect others. The ethicality of an action is then also determined by its effect on other people. This means that the inherent political nature of the individual's practices of liberty does not salvage their ethical status for although these practices necessarily concern others, politics does not preclude the possibility of affecting others adversely. Does care for self, sufficiently regulates the individual's conduct towards others to prevent the self from using the other as mere means in the process of self-creation? Surely, sometimes the only way to secure one's own freedom is to violate somebody else's. Or, instead of using one's freedom to care for others, I can choose to persist in caring for myself exclusively. Once Foucault uttered this concern himself, asking: 'Are we able to have an ethics of acts and their pleasures which would take into account the pleasure

of the other?' (Foucault 1983:346) Before formulating a response to this misgiving, I shall briefly revisit some main critiques elicited by this ethical practice understood as an aesthetics of existence.

In the critical response to Foucault's conception of care of the self, the spotlight has fallen on different aspects and consequences of these practices of self-creation – on the freedom it supposedly secures, on the narcissism which it supposedly does not cultivate, on the 'aestheticisation' of every aspect of life to which it leads, and, of course, on the absence of the other towards whom we bear responsibility. His critics' main refrain is that what Foucault describes as ethical is nothing more than a form of egotistical preoccupation with the self or self-exaltation which is precisely one of the major causes of contemporary society's ethical quandary. How can one become ethical by being self-indulgent, through an essentially narcissistic practice? Is the Greek concern with the self not just an early version of our self-absorption?<sup>7</sup> For it would appear as if the independent self-converted subject, who needs nothing and no one, has no incentive to take up his or her ethical responsibility towards others.

Furthermore, a charge of 'aestheticisation' has been levelled against Foucault based on the presupposition that a chain of associations is in place that leads from aesthetics to fascism, and then to fetishism, hedonism, and meaninglessness (Eagleton 1990:373). Not only do critics such as Eagleton (1990), Wolin (1987, 1992), Callinicos (1989), and others see aesthetics as a slippery slope, they have also come to see aesthetics as the other to ethics.

I would like to counterpose that aesthetics is not the other to ethics, but precisely a necessary – albeit not sufficient – condition for ethical conduct and a generous responsiveness to others. In short, I would like to make a case for the indispensability of the aesthetic to ethics.<sup>8</sup> What is at stake here is the (non)place of the other in self-formation: does it foster a non-reductive responsiveness to the other as end in itself instead of a means to self-formation? Barry Smart (1995) sums it up nicely:

The precedence accorded to care of the self is controversial, particularly if the relation to the Other, responsibility for the Other, is to be placed ... at the centre point in ethics ... Is an ethical relationship to the other implied in the contemporary search for styles of existence affirmed by Foucault? Can such an ethical relation be assumed in a context where the interests of the

7. Foucault's response to this question asked in an interview was that the Greek conception of the self is very different from our present culture of the self: "In the Californian cult of the self one is supposed to discover one's true self, to separate it from that which might obscure or alienate it, to decipher its truth thanks to psychological or psychoanalytic science, which is supposed to be able to tell you what your true self is. Therefore, not only do I not identify this ancient culture of the self with what you might call the Californian cult of the self, I think that they are diametrically opposed. What happened in between is precisely an overturning of the classical culture of the self. This took place when Christianity substituted the idea of a self which one had to renounce ... for the idea of a self which had to be created as a work of art" (1983:362).

8. Jane Bennett (1996) has launched a convincing point by point defence of this point of view. William Connolly (1993:110) too argues that Foucault's conception of an aesthetics of existence fosters a "generous sensibility" and opens up "new possibilities in social relations ... that enable a larger variety of identities to coexist in relations of 'studied' indifference on some occasions, alliance on others, and agonistic respect during periods of rivalry and contestation".

'modern individual' have diminished, if not largely paralysed, any sense of responsibility for the other? It is all very well talking about creating ourselves as a work of art but is such a preoccupation with the self necessarily synonymous with caring or showing responsibility for others?' (p. 101)

I think we will all agree that although care of the self might be considered 'amoral' in the sense that it is primarily unconcerned with the rightness or wrongness of an act as determined by objectively formulated rules or laws, it is not intrinsically bad or even 'unethical' (in the Foucauldian sense of ethics as cultivating a kind of relationship with oneself). For it is this relationship to the self that serves to regulate one's conduct towards others. But if it does not answer to the ultimate criterion of ethics – caring or taking responsibility for others, which is not the same as merely regulating the way in which you behave towards them – what makes for its ethicality? Should it be said once and for all that 'turning one's life into a work of art' is an admirable but ultimately arbitrary practice based on personal choice that is non-essential when one aspires to ethicality?

## The ethicality of self-creation put to the test

### Stage I of my defence: Care of the self in Levinas

When care of the self is opposed to care for others at least one thinker immediately comes to mind, an ethical thinker par excellence, Emmanuel Levinas: he was the one who put our unequivocal and infinite responsibility towards the Other at centre stage. Levinas's thinking serves as the ideal critical yardstick against which to measure the ethicality of care of the self, not because he stands in clear opposition to Foucault, but because in his early works, especially *Existence and Existents* (EE) (1947), *Time and the Other* (TO) (1948), and *Totality and Infinity* (TI) (1961), one finds the deployment of the egoist existent's economic existence. It will be argued that this economic existence functions analogously to the practices of the self in Foucault, which, as we shall see, serves as necessary condition for the individual's ethical conversion. In Levinas's later 'mature' works – from *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (OB) (1974) onwards – economic self-positing is still presupposed but subjectivity is radically reconceptualised as Other-invoked. Levinas consequently seems to want to distance himself from these analyses of economic life which ultimately testify – contrary to Levinas's insistence – to the fact that the self *needs* the Other to save it from its always already too heavy materiality and existential burden. And need, in Levinas's ethical scheme, belongs to the world of the 'atheist' existent, not to the relation with the Other, which is ethics. If I do something for the other because

9. Smart's own initial response is: "Foucault's remarks suggest not; he comments on the significant differences between the ancient Greek culture of the self – in which emphasis is placed upon aesthetics and the importance of 'exercising a perfect mastery over oneself' (Foucault 1986:362) through imposition of 'austerity practices', effectively a government of the self which allegedly simultaneously exemplified a responsibility towards others – and the modern hedonistic cult of the self in which the 'relationship to the self no longer needs to be ascetic to get into relation to the truth' (Foucault 1986:371)"... [I]t is precisely the absence of any consideration of relations with and responsibility for others which makes Foucault's reference to creating ourselves and the autonomy of personal ethics morally problematic" (Smart 1995:102, 105).

I also need the other, I expect something in return. My action thus forms part of an economic transaction and therefore deemed unethical. It is deemed unethical and not merely amoral because for Levinas need is the assimilation of the other to satisfy the self.

My defence of Foucault will proceed in two stages: Firstly, I shall look to Levinas to address the questionable status of care of the self, of these worldly aesthetic practices. Focussing our attention exclusively on Levinas's earliest works will enable us to provisionally bracket out the question of the Other. Here Levinas is concerned with the existent's economic practices in the world. The existent experiences its existence, which is characterised by solitude and materiality, as unbearably heavy. Being-in-the-world provides it with the opportunity to partially rid itself of this existential burden – the existent reaches towards things in the world, labours, gathers possessions, makes a home and learns to provide for the future. This economic existence enables the existent to become self-sufficient and to enjoy life. According to Levinas, this self-sufficiency and independence, which the existent has been able to secure through its economic existence, is a necessary condition for the existent's ethical conversion. In other words, the independence on the basis of which this self is capable of having a relation of *exteriority* with its Other, the Infinite, is constituted by a primordial and primitive way of being with oneself characterised as 'interiority'. However, this condition is necessary but not *sufficient*, that is, interiority is not enough. The Other is the trump card in Levinas's ethical metaphysics. The world provides only a partial alleviation of the heaviness of being. Without an encounter with the Other, the existent is doomed to 'self-implode' under the unbearable weight of its materiality, but also, more importantly, doomed to remain unethical. The question is whether or not the Foucauldian notion of care for self, which, I contend, functions analogously to economic existence in Levinas, can ultimately escape the necessity of being-for-the-other? Secondly, the conclusive stage of our defence will consider to what extent self-concern fosters other-responsiveness.

Employing Levinas as critical yardstick is not novel in itself.<sup>10</sup> What is new is the *way* in which it is attempted here – by way of a 'functional analogy' between the late Foucault's aesthetics of existence and the early Levinas's economic existence. In their respective conceptualisations, we find certain structural elements that function in an analogous fashion. In other words, these structural elements are comparable in certain respects and specifically in a way which makes the nature of the things compared clearer. The way in which the existent's auto-positing function in Levinas's thinking, should enable us to gauge the ethical status of the Foucauldian subject's self-creation.

10.1 would not be the first to involve Levinas in this debate. Others have paved the way, suggesting that Levinas's emphasis on our infinite responsibility towards the Other has the potential to emend Foucault's conception of care of self. I am thinking, for example, of Barry Smart's "The subject of responsibility" (1995) and David Boothroyd's "Foucault's alimentary philosophy: care of the self and responsibility for the other" (1996). However, neither Smart nor Boothroyd have explored this possibility fully.

The early Levinas directs our attention to a 'level of life' phenomenologically prior to that in which the encounter with the Other takes place, as Boothroyd (1996:376) contends. In this sense, the existent, as Levinas refers to the substantive subject, is in this instant a wholly separate, solitudinous subject (Boothroyd (1996:376)). In an analogous fashion, care of the self in Foucault can be thought of as the existence of a subject which is *not yet* in a relationship to others. The self-fashioning *praxis* of Foucault's subject unfolds in another ontological order as that in which it figures as part of the socio-political world shared with others. Although Foucault acknowledges the role of others in ethical self-formation, they merely feature as means to an end, as what Levinas would call 'provisional alterity' that the self uses to aid its formation. This is a level on which our ordinary ethico-political conceptions of self-other relations have no bearing on the self and its self-reflexive movements. The political nature of the self's practices of liberty is therefore provisionally bracketed out. Others aid the self's aesthetics of existence, but they do not (yet) figure as the object of our responsibility. This is something Levinas articulates in *Time and the Other* 'by saying that they do not take place in the same time, but in different "Instants"' (1996:373).

Both Foucault and Levinas describe a process by which the subject becomes a self-at-home-with-itself. Foucault maintains that within the field of normative practices in which aesthetic self-production takes place, no disjuncture with 'external' normative codes of practice arises. The aim of stylising one's practice in such a way as to make oneself a work of art meant, as Aristotle said of the work of art, that 'it is not possible either to take away or to add anything, implying that excess and defect destroy the goodness of art, while the mean preserves it' (Aristotle 1980:38 [Book II, 1106b]). In other words, it entails creating oneself in such a manner that there is no disjunction between one's performance and one's idea of exterior value. As Butler (2000) points out, lives which are made into oeuvres:

[D]o not simply conform to moral precepts or norms in such a way that selves, considered pre-formed or ready-made, fit themselves into a mould that is set forth by the precept. On the contrary, the self fashions itself in terms of the norm, comes to inhabit and incorporate the norm, but *the norm is not in this sense external to the principle by which the self is formed.* (p. 218, italics in the original)

We find an analogous structure in Levinas: 'The way of the I against the "other" of the world consists in *sojourning*, in *identifying oneself* by existing here *at home with oneself (chez soi)* ... In the world, which is from the first other, the I is nonetheless autochthonous', that is, an indigenous inhabitant (TI, 37/7).

By focussing on this connection between Levinas and Foucault, I want to explore the notion of a self-styling individuality emerging only out of the reflexive movement of the Same. According to their respective formulations, these immanent practices of self-conversion or 'atheism', of independence, self-sufficiency, self-possession and enjoyment serve as a

necessary condition for the subject's ethical becoming or conversion. If one takes proper care of the self, according to Foucault, one's conduct towards others will be regulated. He insists, moreover, that 'this *ethos* of freedom is also a way of *caring* for others' (Foucault 1984:7, my emphasis). According to Levinas, 'auto-personification' enacted in economic existence (TI, 147/120) enables the existent to take up his/her ethical responsibility towards others, for we cannot receive the Other with empty hands and a closed home. Without aesthetic self-formation (Foucault) and economic auto-personification (Levinas), there can be no care for others, no possibility of generosity and hospitality.

## Stage II of my defence: Self-concern and other-responsiveness

The conclusive stage of my defence will be dedicated to finding that dynamic in Foucault's aesthetics of existence which cultivates a non-reductive responsiveness to others. For how does the self – educable as it may be – succeed in countering the strong gravitational pull of his/her egoist economy without external intervention? Upon closer investigation, one finds that Foucault's aesthetics of existence do not stop at self-constitution. If every alternative solution recreates the same conditions of unfreedom which it tries to counter, proper care of the self must also entail *transgression* of the self. After the self has learnt to master its excessive and violent impulses (*freedom from*), it also has to overcome those limits imposed from within and without (*freedom to*). Transgression makes of the arts of the self something other than mere contemplative self-possession. It implements a constant self-critique which takes shape as the possibility of transgressing one's limits. Transgression is not the transcendence of all limits, but pressure exerted on the limits to enlarge them in order to make room for alterity. In the process, difference is 'non-positively affirmed' within the limits of the self, that is, alterity is relocated to exist as otherness within the self (Foucault 1963:36). The other is affirmed as radical difference within the self and this is precisely what turns the self-converted self, *outward* towards others.

Although transgression opens up the ethical scope of care of the self, it ultimately remains unclear how and by whom this self-violation is triggered. How can the ethical initiative – the enlargement of the limits of the self to make room for the other as other – emanate from a closed system unto itself? How does self-concern or conversion to the self, trigger a beneficent responsiveness to the other? According to Foucault, the existence of limits constitutes a necessary condition for the possibility of transgression. But how are we to posit a limit separating the self and what is other-than-self if the Foucauldian conception of power/knowledge precisely undermines the distinction between the inside of the self and outside of power? Ultimately, we shall not have to look too far afield for the answer. For the key to other-responsiveness in Foucault is to be found, not outside of the self, but in the *repetition of the same*. Through the disciplined and repeated practices of the self an ethical sensibility is cultivated which allows differences to exist as such.

Foucault qualifies the relation between the same and the other in terms of the Deleuzian notion of difference and repetition which Foucault discusses in his 1970 essay, 'Theatrum philosophicum'.<sup>11</sup> It concerns the appearance of alterity in an entirely different guise. It is only through the repetition of the Same that a space is created for alterity to exist as Other.

The main question that occupies Foucault in this essay is how difference can be understood differentially instead of trying to find mutual characteristics that underlie difference (1970:182). For if we truly succeed in understanding difference differentially 'repetition ... would cease to function as the dreary succession of the identical, and would become displaced difference' (1970:182).

According to Foucault, *categories* are responsible for the most tenacious subjection of difference. They suppress the anarchy of difference, divide differences into subdivisions, and delimit their rights. This is why difference can only be liberated through the invention of an acategorical thought (1970:186). Foucault uses Andy Warhol's popular art to illustrate the way in which acategorical thought functions. Think, for example, of his representations of Campbell's soup cans: same brand, same size, same paint surface – 22, a 100, even 200 times more of the same. Sometimes the monotony would be interrupted by the use of different colours, but then the variation would only serve to once again emphasise the repetition of the same. By mimicking the condition of mass advertising and presenting this affectlessness as art, Warhol makes a mockery of art understood as a sublime aesthetical experience that expresses that which is original and unique. The repetition of identical, recurrent soup cans is a transgressive move that challenges this categorical conception of art. It wants to address the absurdity of life and show how centralised thought reduces and eventually completely eliminates the marginal. It is precisely the absence of diversity that paradoxically frees difference from suppression by identity:

But in concentrating on this boundless monotony, we find the sudden illumination of multiplicity itself – with nothing at its centre, at its highest point, or beyond it – a flickering of light that travels even faster than the eyes and successively lights up the moving labels ... that refer to each other to eternity, without ever saying anything: suddenly, arising from the background of the old inertia of equivalences, the striped form of the event tears through the darkness, and the eternal phantasm informs that soup can, that singular and depthless face. (Foucault 1970:189)

The univocity of being, the unambiguity of its expression, is paradoxically the principal condition, which permits difference to escape the yoke of similarity. Difference is no longer hierarchically ordered and neutralised as pure negative element by categories (Foucault 1970:192).

How does this relate back to the self's aesthetics of existence? However much the outcome of this process of self-stylisation depends upon heteronomously determined rules and

11. This essay is a review of two books by Gilles Deleuze: *Différence et répétition* (Paris: P.U.F., 1969) and *Logique du sens* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1969).

changes accordingly, it is nevertheless essentially a repetition of the same – the repetition of the same cycle of self-creation and self-refusal of which the content might vary but the form stays the same. In the self's efforts to stylise his or her freedom, he or she engages in certain self-directed practical exercises with the common goal of critically remoulding externally imposed limits (HS III, 58–65/74–82). This process of 'ethical self-creation' is then also followed by a critical relation to those self-imposed rules and ultimately by a refusal of that self-created identity. The 'self' is never only crafting but always simultaneously crafted. In other words, the subject is not first formed and then turns around and begins suddenly to form itself. On the contrary, the line between how it is formed and how it becomes a kind of forming, is not easily, if ever drawn.<sup>12</sup>

Now, what makes for the ethicality of this form of resistance? It is precisely in the predictable and doggedly persistent repetition of the practices of the self that a form of difference is unleashed that slips through the cracks of normalising power. Contrary to a difference posited in opposition to its antipode, which, as we know, is but two projections of the same axis, the form of alterity freed when the same is repeated is not susceptible to reduction or assimilation. Deleuze (1988) explains it as follows:

If [*the inside*] is not a reproduction of the Same, but a repetition of the Different. It is not the emanation of an 'I', but something that places in immanence an always other or a Non-self ... I do not encounter myself on the outside, I find the other in me. (p. 98)

It is this 'other in me' that accounts for the self-creating subject's inherent other-responsiveness.

## Conclusion

Foucault's condemnation of the other-reductive tendencies of the same/self and his plea for the rights and value of alterity are unequivocal. He rejects: (1) good sense as that which gives preference to the common elements underlying difference; (2) dialectics as that which dismisses difference as the opposite of identity; and (3) categorical thought which serves only to subject difference. It is not surprising then that Foucault fails to (or rather refuses to) provide us with an adequate account of the other person in his later works, as if such a representation would reduce the other's alterity to what is simply contrary to the self.

Foucault's refusal is a response to what he considers to be the immorality wired into the conventional morality of good and evil. It is the same morality that separates good people from evildoers, the sane from the mad. This same morality calls the self selfish and the Other good by virtue of his or her alterity, or alternatively, labels the Other evil by virtue of his or her refusal to conform, to fit in and abide by an arbitrary order. To

12. Judith Butler (2000:230), in one of her essays on Foucault, expresses it very eloquently: "... the formation of the subject is the institution of the very reflexivity that indistinguishably assumes the burden of formation. The 'indistinguishability' of this line is precisely the juncture where social norms intersect with ethical demands, and where both are produced in the context of a self-making which is never fully self-inaugurated".



reach beyond the immorality of good and evil is to embrace an ethics where the emphasis is on the way in which the self and the other person interact. It is an interaction marked not by 'the transcendentalisation of contingent identities' (Connolly 1993:109), but by a generosity fostered through care, care of the self to be able to care for others. This generosity is not to be found within an oppositional structure that distinguishes between the inside of the self and the outside of the other. Instead, we find that the self and the other feature as nodes in networks of power and/or knowledge, or more precisely, they appear as relations of force whose point of contact functions as the limit that separates them. Thus there *is* a limit, (for without limits transgression would be impossible) but not a fixed limit. Instead, 'the outside' appears in the form of:

[A] moving matter animated by peristaltic movements, folds and foldings that together make up an inside: they are not something other than the outside, but precisely the inside of the outside. (Deleuze 1988:96)

Here Deleuze describes the inside [of Foucault's self] as 'an operation of the outside ... an inside which is merely the fold of the outside, as if the ship were a folding of the sea'. The Other is in me – immanent. To be sure, this *other in the same* is not the 'de-substantiation' or 'subjection' of the subject (OB, 127/163) but precisely its subjectivisation – the remoulding of its limits to craft a new form of subjectivity with an increased scope for thinking, acting and being. In other words, this non-indifference to the other fosters self-critique that is nevertheless not at the expense of the self. This reading does not only constitute a response to the Levinasian criticism levelled against Foucault, but also presents us with an approach to ethics in a time when morality is falling short. What is at stake for Foucault is not only our freedom but also the resumption of responsibility for our own ethical self-formation.

Both in its outwardly directed resistance to power and in its self-directed practical exercises, the self bends these power relations inwards to create and repeatedly reshape an inside. In this way, the zone of subjectivisation is created as a work of art. And if the inside is constituted by the folding of the outside, there must be a topological relation between them: 'the relation to oneself is homologous to the relation with the outside and the two are in contact' (Deleuze 1988:119). And thus by caring for myself, I necessarily also take responsibility for the other. The limits of the self are enlarged to make room for the other as other. The other's alterity is not attenuated because the other is not reduced to one pole in a binary opposition. The only way in which difference is freed to exist as alterity is through the *active* repetition of the practices of the self ... 'for in concentrating on this boundless monotony, we find the sudden illumination of multiplicity itself': 'suddenly, arising from the background of the old inertia of equivalences, the striped form of the event tears through the darkness' (Foucault 1970:189). The secret of Foucault's ethics of the self is 'to await, in the always unpredictable conclusion to this elaborate preparation, the shock of difference' (Foucault 1970:190) – not as something that is introduced from the outside but as a necessary by-product of the workings of the inside.

## Acknowledgements

This article is based on the author's PhD thesis entitled Ethics and Aesthetics in Foucault and Levinas completed at the Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands, in 2005. It is available online: <https://repository.ubn.ru.nl/bitstream/handle/2066/26929/26929.pdf?sequence=1>.

## Competing interests

The author has declared that no competing interest exists.

## Author's contributions

A.B.H. is the sole author of this article.

## Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

## Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author, and the publisher.

## References

- Aristotle, 1980, *The Nicomachean ethics*, transl. W.D. Ross, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Bennett, J., 1996, "'How is it, then, that we still remain Barbarians?'" Foucault, Schiller, and the Aestheticization of ethics', *Political Theory* 24(4), 653–672. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591796024004003>
- Boothroyd, D., 1996, 'Foucault's alimentary philosophy: Care of the self and responsibility for the other', *Man and World* 29(4), 361–386. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01271374>
- Butler, J., [2000] 2001, 'What is critique? An essay on Foucault's virtue', in D. Ingram (ed.), *The political: Readings in continental philosophy*, pp. 212–226, Basil Blackwell, London.
- Callinicos, A., 1989, *Against postmodernism*, Polity, Cambridge, MA.
- Connolly, W.E., [1993] 1998, 'Beyond good and evil. The ethical sensibility of Michel Foucault', in J. Moss (ed.), *The Later Foucault*, pp. 108–128, Sage Publications, London.
- Deleuze, G., 1988, *Foucault*, transl. S. Hand, Athlone Press, London.
- Eagleton, T., 1990, *The ideology of the aesthetic*, Basil Blackwell, New York, NY.
- Foucault, M., [1963] 1977, 'A preface to transgression', in D.F. Bouchard (ed.), *Michel Foucault. Language, counter-memory, practice: Selected essays and interviews*, transl. D.F. Bouchard & S. Simon, pp. 29–52, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.
- Foucault, M., [1970] 1977, 'Theatrum Philosophicum', in D.F. Bouchard (ed.), *Michel Foucault. Language, counter-memory, practice. Selected essays and interviews*, transl. D.F. Bouchard & S. Simon, pp. 165–196, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.
- Foucault, M., [1983] 1984, 'On the genealogy of ethics: An overview of work in progress', in P. Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault reader*, pp. 340–372, Pantheon Books, New York, NY.
- Foucault, M., [1983] 1986, 'Kant on enlightenment and revolution', *Economy and Society* 15(1), 88–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03085148600000016>

- Foucault, M., [1984] 1988, 'The ethic of care for the self as a practice of freedom. An interview with Michel Foucault on January, 20, 1984', in J.W. Bernauer & D.M. Rasmussen (eds.), *The final Foucault*, trans. J.D. Gauthier, pp. 1–20, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Foucault, M., 1990a, *The history of sexuality. Volume I: Introduction*, transl. R. Hurley, Penguin, London. In French: *Histoire de la sexualité, I: la volonté de savoir*. (1976). Paris: Galimard. [Abbreviated as HS I; the English page references are followed by the original French page references].
- Foucault, M., 1990b, *The history of sexuality. Volume III: The care of the self*, transl. R. Hurley, Penguin, London. In French: *Histoire de la sexualité, III: la souci de soi*. (1984). Paris: Galimard. [Abbreviated as HS III; the English page reference are followed by the original French page references].
- Foucault, M., 1992, *The history of sexuality. Volume II: The use of pleasure*, transl. R. Hurley, Penguin, London. In French: *Histoire de la sexualité, II: l'usage des plaisirs*. (1984). Paris: Galimard. [Abbreviated as HS II; the English page references are followed by the original French page references].
- Gutting, G. (ed.), 1994, *The Cambridge companion to Foucault*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Habermas, J., 1993, *Justification and application: Remarks on discourse ethics*, transl. C.P. Cronin, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Hacking, I., [1984] 1986, 'Self-improvement', in D.C. Hoy (ed.), *Foucault. A critical reader*, pp. 235–240, Basil Blackwell Ltd., Oxford.
- Han, B., 2002, *Foucault's critical project. Between the transcendental and the historical*, transl. E. Pile, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.
- Hoy, D.C. (ed.), 1986, *Foucault. A critical reader*, Basil Blackwell, Ltd., Oxford.
- Kant, I., [1785] 1996, 'Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals', in M.J. Gregor (ed.), *Immanuel Kant. Practical philosophy*, transl. M.J. Gregor, pp. 42–108, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Levinas, E., 1978, *Existence and existents*, transl. A. Lingis, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague. In French: *De l'existence a l'existant*. (1978) [1947]. Paris: Vrin. [Abbreviated as EE; the English page references are followed by the original French page references].
- Levinas, E., 1979, *Totality and infinity. An essay on exteriority*, transl. A. Lingis, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague. In French: *Totalité et infini*. (1961). The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff. [Abbreviated as TI; the English page references are followed by the original French page references].
- Levinas, E., 1987, *Time and the other*, transl. R. Cohen, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh. In French: *Le temps et l'autre* (1948). Grenoble & Paris: B. Arthaud. [Abbreviated as TO; the English page references are followed by the original French page references].
- Levinas, E., 1991, *Otherwise than being or beyond essence*, transl. A. Lingis, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht. In French: *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (1974). The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff. [Abbreviated as OB; the English page references are followed by the original French page references].
- Smart, B., 1995, 'The subject of responsibility', *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 21(4), 93–110. <https://doi.org/10.1177/019145379502100405>
- Wolin, R., 1987, 'Foucault's aesthetic decisionism', *Telos* 67, 71–86. <https://doi.org/10.3817/0386067071>
- Wolin, R., 1992, *The terms of cultural criticism*. Columbia University Press, New York.