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Se dépendre de soi-même. A Critique of Foucault's Ethics

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Abstract. Between the first and the second volume of *The History of Sexuality* there is a gap of eight years in which Foucault did not publish anything except interviews. Analyzing some of those interviews, the article reconstructs the reasons that lead Foucault to abandon the thematization of power's constraints imposed on the subject and start to elaborate an ethics in which the subject can be rid of him or herself through a care of pleasure(s). Arguing how this change does not represent for Foucault a denying of his previous work but its evolution, the article shows that, despite Foucault's attempt to establish a discourse other than psychoanalysis, his ethics of sexuality unwittingly returns to the "force" that psychoanalysis recognizes as animating sexuality.

Keywords. Ethics, pleasure(s), drives, de-subjectivisation, *Askēsis*.

LIMIT-EXPERIENCES

In an interview with Duccio Trombadori originally published in Italian, Foucault recalls that he was able to dispose of the philosophies that were dominating the scene of his youth – «the Hegelian system, on the one hand, and the philosophy of the subject, on the other» (Foucault [1981a]: 44) – because he discovered a "protean" and "nomadic" way of doing philosophy unhooked from the traditional cogito¹. For Foucault, those kinds of metaphysics were absolutely unsuitable. If in fact the Hegelian system wanted to reduce the multiple and divergent truths of history into the rationality of a closed unity, then the philosophy of the subject – either in the form of phenomenology or existentialism – «firmly maintained the supremacy of the subject and its fundamental value, without any radical breaks» (Foucault [1981a]: 48), reducing the contradictions of human experiences to the uniformity of the Cartesian subject.

¹ «Nietzsche, Blanchot, and Bataille: they are the writers who permitted me to free myself from the others who had formed me during my university education at the beginning of the 1950s» (Foucault [1981a]: 44).

Not only did the Hegelian system and its faith in the all-encompassing power of reason appear naïve to Foucault, but so did the philosophy of the subject. Although it was centered in the theorization of everyday life experience, it was still unable to hear what Foucault called *la pensée du dehors* – which is to say, the force of negativity:

The phenomenologist's experience is basically a way of organizing the conscious perception (regard réflexif) of any aspect of daily, lived experience in its transitory form, in order to grasp its meaning. Nietzsche, Bataille, and Blanchot, on the contrary, try through experience to reach that point of life which lies as close as possible to the impossibility of living, which lies at the limit or extreme. They attempt to gather the maximum amount of intensity and impossibility at the same time. The work of the phenomenologist, however, essentially consists of unfolding the entire field of possibilities connected to daily experience. Moreover, phenomenology tries to grasp the significance of daily experience in order to reaffirm the fundamental character of the subject, of the self, of its transcendental functions. On the contrary, experience according to Nietzsche, Blanchot, and Bataille has rather the task of "tearing" the subject from itself in such a way that it is no longer the subject as such, or that it is completely "other" than itself so that it may arrive at its annihilation, its dissociation. (Foucault [1981a]: 30-32)

As evidenced in this quotation, what interests Foucault is not the re-appropriation of an experience through its putative meaning but on the contrary, encountering the limits of experience, namely that point of life in which experience itself exceeds reason and therefore cannot be understood. The "extreme" or "the limit-experience" to which Foucault is interested escapes the grip of consciousness and imposes itself as the totally "other" to a transcendental subject that is structurally unable to grasp it. Furthermore, escaping rationality, this "other" jeopardizes the stability of a subject that is sustained by rationality.

My encounter with Bataille, Blanchot and, through them, my reading of Nietzsche. What did they represent for me? First of all, an invitation to call into

question the category of the "subject," its primacy and its originating function. And then, the conviction that an operation of that kind would not have made any sense if it had been confined to speculation: to call the subject into question had to mean to live it in an experience that might be its real destruction or dissociation, its explosion or upheaval into something radically "other". (Foucault [1981a]: 46)

Thanks to these philosophers who «tried to reach a certain point in life that is as close as possible to the "unlivable", to that which can't be lived through», Foucault discovered and acquired the method for a philosophy of de-subjectification, that is, a philosophy in which «the idea of limit-experience that wrenches the subject from itself» is the cornerstone (Foucault [1978a]: 241). «It is this de-subjectifying undertaking, declares Foucault, the idea of a "limit-experience" that tears the subject from itself, which is the fundamental lesson that I've learned from these authors. And no matter how boring and erudite my resulting books have been, *this lesson has always allowed me to conceive them as direct experiences to "tear" me from myself*, to prevent me from always being the same» (Foucault [1981a]: 31-32). If in the same interview Foucault can declare without hesitation that he never considered himself a philosopher², it is because *anti*-philosophers such as Nietzsche, Bataille, and Blanchot have inspired all his work. «These thinkers, Foucault observes, were not "philosophers" in the strict, institutional sense of the term» since they «didn't have the problem of constructing systems, but of having direct, personal experiences» through their philosophy (Foucault [1981a]: 30). Foucault declares: «there is no book that I've written without there having been, at least in part, a direct personal experience. I had a personal, complex, direct relation with madness, psychiatric hospitals, and illness. And even with death» (Foucault [1981a]: 38).

Even if we do not follow the controversial interpretation of Foucault's life and philosophy that James Miller offers in his biography, an inter-

² «I don't consider myself a philosopher» (Foucault [1981a]: 29).

pretation according to which Foucault always tried to reach death or, at least “limit experiences” as close as possible to death (through sadomasochism and drugs from Miller’s point of view)³, we have to acknowledge that, according to this interview from 1978, a philosophy of “de-subjectification” – to which Foucault refers as a philosophy that «requires the maximum of intensity and the maximum of impossibility at the same time,» or as a philosophy that leads to «limit-experience that tears the subject from itself» (Foucault [1981a]: 30) – is not just a phase of his research or a peregrine interest, but is instead the theoretical framework that guided Foucault in *each* of his intellectual elaborations.

THE ASKĒSIS OF PLEASURE(S)

This perspective becomes even more evident near the end of his life when Foucault abandons the thematization of power’s constraints imposed on the subject and starts to elaborate an ethics in which the subject can be rid of him or herself through a care of pleasure(s). At the time, Foucault was no longer interested in showing how the subject is imprisoned inside an *historical a priori* that reduce him or her to a puppet of society, but in understanding how the subject can be changed by self-transformative practices. This does not mean either that Foucault was disavowing his work on power or that he was no longer interested in understanding the possibilities of resisting social constraints, but rather that he was changing his perspective and putting at the center of his reflection *les modes de subjectivation* instead of the structures of dominance that produce the subject. As Deleuze underlines, «c’est n’est pas du tout qu’il répudie l’œuvre précédente. Au contraire,

c’est toute son œuvre précédente qui le pousse vers ce nouvel affrontement» (Deleuze [1986a]: 149). Indeed, given that the subject is always caught in dynamics of power, Foucault was trying to understand how the subject can escape from him or herself, how he or she can resist the structures that create him or her as he or she is.

Obviously, this change of perspective was difficult for Foucault. Deleuze talks about a real crisis: «Après *La volonté de savoir* il a traversé une crise, de tout ordre, politique, vitale, pensée. Comme chez tous les grands penseurs, sa pensée a toujours procédé par crise et secousses comme condition de création, comme condition d’une cohérence ultime. J’ai eu l’impression qu’il voulait être seul, aller là où on ne pourrait pas le suivre, sauf quelque intime. J’avais beaucoup plus besoin de lui que lui de moi» (Deleuze [1986b]: 115). It took eight years of silence in which Foucault published nothing except interviews⁴ to come out from his crisis with the book that marked the turning point⁵ in the way he conceived his work: *The Use of Pleasure*, Volume 2 of *The History of Sexuality*. In the preface, he explains the reasons why he changed his perspective and how important the crisis was for his philosophical thought:

As for what motivated me, it is quite simple; I would hope that in the eyes of some people it might be sufficient in itself. It was curiosity—the only kind of curiosity, in any case, that is worth acting upon with a degree of obstinacy: not the curiosity that seeks to assimilate what it is proper for one to know, but that which enables one to get free of oneself. After all, what would be the value of the passion for knowledge if it resulted only in a certain amount of knowledgeableness and not, in one way or another and to

³ «The crux of what is most original and challenging about Foucault’s way of thinking, as I see it, is his unrelenting, deeply ambiguous and profoundly problematic preoccupation with death, which he explored not only in the exoteric form of his writing, but also, and I believe critically, in the esoteric form of sado-masochistic eroticism» (Miller [1993]: 9).

⁴ «C’est pourquoi les entretiens de Foucault font pleinement partie de son œuvre» (Deleuze [1986c]: 144).

⁵ «Sans doute *La volonté de savoir* dégageait des points de résistance au pouvoir; mais justement, c’est leur statut, leur origine, leur genèse qui restait vagues. Foucault avait peut-être le sentiment qu’il lui fallait à tout prix franchir cette ligne, passe l’autre côté. Aller encore au-delà de savoir-pouvoir. Même s’il fallait remettre en question tout le programme de *l’Histoire de la sexualité*» (Deleuze [1986a]: 148-149).

the extent possible, in the knower's straying afield of himself? There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all. People will say, perhaps, that these games with oneself would better be left backstage; or, at best, that they might properly form part of those preliminary exercises that are forgotten once they have served their purpose. But, then, what is philosophy today—philosophical activity, I mean—if it is not the critical work that thought brings to bear on itself? In what does it consist, if not in the endeavor to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known? There is always something ludicrous in philosophical discourse when it tries, from the outside, to dictate to others, to tell them where their truth is and how to find it, or when it works up a case against them in the language of naive positivity. But it is entitled to explore what might be changed, in its own thought, through the practice of a knowledge that is foreign to it. The “essay”—which should be understood as the assay or test by which, in the game of truth, one undergoes changes, and not as the simplistic appropriation of others for the purpose of communication—is the living substance of philosophy, at least if we assume that philosophy is still what it was in times past, i.e., an “*askēsis*,” *askēsis*, an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought. (Foucault [1984a]: 14-15)

From this standpoint we understand that the notion of *askēsis* that Foucault brings out from the texts belonging to the Greek and Latin wisdom, although it emerges explicitly only in the last part of his life, should be considered the (anti-)philosophical keystone that bears the theoretical elaboration of all his books⁶. It is this very

notion, thought of as a *technique de transformation de soi-même*, that not only pushes Foucault to change completely the history of sexuality but also becomes the final goal of the desexualization of pleasure(s) that, as we will see now, characterizes his ethics. The reason why Foucault decides to dig into texts that belong to antiquity can be read in an interview with Rabinow and Dreyfus:

What I wanted to do in Volume Two of *The History of Sexuality* was to show that you have nearly the same restrictive, the same prohibitive code in the fourth century B.C. and in the moralists and doctors at the beginning of the empire. But I think that the way they integrate those prohibitions in relation to oneself is completely different. I don't think one can find any normalization in, for instance, the Stoic ethics. The reason is, I think, that the principal aim, the principal target of this kind of ethics, was an aesthetic one. (Foucault [1983]: 254)

The attempt of those texts «was not to normalize the population», indeed they were not meant for common people. On the contrary they were reserved for a “small elite” of people who could afford to have an aesthetic relation with life that could try to *transform* their own lives in an exemplary existence that should be remembered (Foucault [1983]: 254). During the last part of his life Foucault is more interested in developing an “aesthetic of existence” or, to put it in other words “an art of living” that, borrowing the name from antiquity, he calls *askēsis*.

From this perspective, we should remember that the word “aesthetics” comes from the Greek verb αἰσθάνομαι, which means to perceive in physical terms. The ethics of Foucault is in fact devoted to an *increasing* of the capacity

⁶ With the exception of *The Order of Things* that Foucault considered a purely academic book: «I have already spoken to you about the “limit-experiences”; this is really the theme that fascinates me. Madness, death, sexuality, crime: these are the things that attract my attention most. Instead, I have always considered *The Order of Things* a kind of formal exercise. [...] *The Order of Things* is not my “true” book: it has its “marginality” compared to the depth of participation and interest which is present in and which subtended the others. Nevertheless, by some

peculiar paradox, *The Order of Things* has been the book that has had the greatest success with the public. Probably because of the unheard of concentration of criticism that it received at the time of its publication, everyone wanted to buy it. Tens of thousands of copies were sold. It's a paradox that is due to the unhealthy character of the consumption of a theoretical text in relation to the quantity of criticism that appears in newspapers and magazines» (Foucault [1981a]: 99-101).

to feel pleasure(s) in order to transform the self rather than a renunciation of these same pleasures. This is the reason why the notion of *askēsis* theorized by Foucault should not be confused with the notion of ascetism. The ethics of Foucault is not in fact an ethics of sacrifice and deprivation of wordily pleasures aimed to embrace either a metaphysical or a religious dimension. There is no transcendence at all in Foucault's account. On the contrary, what Foucault presents is the «pure immanence»⁷ of a life that, following Nietzsche's step, wants to become art. For this reason, I agree with Deleuze who explains that «quand Foucault en arrive au thème ultime de la "subjectivation," celle-ci consiste essentiellement dans l'invention de nouvelles possibilités de vie. Comme dit Nietzsche, dans la construction de véritables styles de vie : cette fois, un vitalisme sur fond d'esthétique» (Deleuze [1986b]: 125).

Obviously, Foucault's return to the Greeks should not be read as a prescriptive rule. Foucault is far from providing us with any prescriptions or rules whatsoever. His aim is to show examples of how it is possible to create aesthetic relations with life that, by increasing the subject's capacity to feel pleasure, can transform the subject itself. Deleuze suggests that for Foucault:

Il s'agit d'inventer des modes d'existence, suivant des règles facultatives, capables de résister au pouvoir comme de se dérober au savoir, même si le savoir tente les pénétrer et le pouvoir de se les approprier, mais les modes d'existence ou possibilités de vie ne cessent de se recréer, de nouveau surgissent, et s'il est vrai que cette dimension fut inventé par le Grecs,

⁷ «Absolute immanence is in itself: it is not in something, to something; it does not depend on an object or belong to a subject. [...] Immanence is not related to Some Thing as a unity superior to all things or to a Subject as an act that brings about a synthesis of things: it is only when immanence is no longer immanence to anything other than itself that we can speak of a plane of immanence. No more than the transcendental field is defined by consciousness can the plane of immanence be defined by a subject or an object that is able to contain it. We will say of pure immanence that it is A LIFE» (Deleuze [1995]: 26,27).

nous ne faisons pas un retour au Grecs quand nous cherchons quels sont ceux qui dessinent aujourd'hui, quel est notre vouloir-artiste irréductible au savoir et au pouvoir. Pas plus qu'il n'y a de retour aux Grecs, il n'y a de retour au sujet chez Foucault. Croire que Foucault redécouvre, retrouve la subjectivité qu'il y avait d'abord niée, c'est un malentendu assez profond [...] Je crois même que la subjectivation a peu de choses à voir avec un sujet. Il s'agit plutôt d'un champ électrique ou magnétique, une individuation opérant par intensité (basses autant que hautes), des champs individués et non pas des personnes ou des identités. C'est ce que Foucault, dans d'autres occasions, appelle la passion. (Deleuze [1986b]: 127)

The «other occasion» to which Deleuze refers is a dialogue with Werner Schroeter in which Foucault, after declaring himself to be a man of passion⁸, finally reveals that «l'art de vivre c'est de tuer la psychologie» (Foucault [1981b]: 256). This dialogue is fundamental because it lays bare the direction of Foucault's ethics. If the goal of Foucault's ethics is to establish an aesthetic relation with life that can turn it into a work of art, and if this work of art consists precisely in killing off psychology, then we understand clearly that the desexualization of pleasure(s) which Foucault sustains is nothing but practices that lead the subject to get rid of him or herself. Practices that, in other words, lead the subject into a state of passion in which he can do nothing but cease being him or herself. These «technologies of the self», in a Foucauldian expression, are aimed at nothing but creating a desubjectivized art of living.

In this dialogue Foucault also explains the passion that, according to Deleuze's interpretation, characterizes the desubjectivized art of living that Foucault sustains:

Qu'est-ce que la passion? C'est un état, c'est quelque chose qui vous tombe dessus, qui s'empare de vous, qui vous tient par les deux épaules, qui ne connaît pas de pause, qui n'a pas d'origine. En fait, on ne

⁸ When Werner Schreoter asks directly: «Avez-vous une tendance pour la passion ou l'amour?» Foucault answers concisely: «La passion» (Foucault [1981b]: 253).

sait pas d'où ça vient. La passion est venue comme ça. C'est un état toujours mobile, mais qui ne va pas vers un point donné. Il y a des moments forts et des moments faibles, des moments où c'est porté à l'incandescence. Ça flotte. Ça balance. C'est une sorte d'instant instable qui se poursuit pour des raisons obscures, peut-être par inertie. Ça cherche, à la limite, à se maintenir et à disparaître. La passion se donne toutes les conditions pour continuer et, en même temps, elle se détruit d'elle-même. Dans la passion, on n'est pas aveugle. Simplement, dans ces situations de passion, on n'est pas soi-même. Ça n'a plus de sens d'être soi-même. On voit les choses autrement. (Foucault [1981b]: 251)

If I had not identified already the person who wrote these lines, one might have thought they had been written by Lacan, or at least by someone who wanted to describe what Lacan means by *Jouissance*. We can, of course, resist Deleuze's interpretation of Foucault and refuse to associate Foucault's askēsis with the passion described in this dialogue – but how could then we explain that Foucault, besides defining himself as a man of passion, also describes the state of passion with the same words used in describing the askēsis he is trying to achieve? How can we ignore that it is Foucault himself who declares that the only form of knowledge that is worthwhile is «celle qui permet de se déprendre de soi-même» since the «épreuve modificatrice de soi-même est le corps vivant de la philosophie, si du moins celle-ci est encore maintenant ce qu'elle était autrefois, c'est-à-dire une «ascèse» [askēsis]?» And what does it mean to “kill off psychology” if not to live in a state of passion in which the subject «n'est pas soi-même» given that «ça n'a plus de sens d'être soi-même»? Foucault himself summed up the question that he tried to answer throughout his life in these terms: «can it be said that the subject is the only form of existence possible? Can't there be experiences in which the subject, in its constitutive relations, in its self-identity, isn't given any more? And thus wouldn't experiences be given in which the subject could dissociate itself, break its relationship with itself, lose its identity? Wasn't this perhaps the experience of Nietzsche, with

the metaphor of the Eternal Return?» (Foucault [1981a]: 49).

THE DRIVES BEYOND PLEASURES

According to Foucault, «there is no “abnormal” pleasure, there is no “pathology” of pleasure» and for this reason it is possible to derive from the ethics of the ancients (Greeks and Latins) an *art de vivre* devoted to the increase of pleasure (Foucault [1978b]: 388). Nevertheless, he has to admit that:

What seems to have formed the object of moral reflection for the Greeks in matters of sexual conduct was not exactly the act itself (considered in its different modalities), or desire (viewed from the standpoint of its origin or its aim), or even pleasure (evaluated according to the different objects or practices that can cause it); it was more the dynamics that joined all three in a circular fashion (the desire that leads to the act, the act that is linked to pleasure, and the pleasure that occasions desire). The ethical question that was raised was not: which desires? which acts? which pleasures? but rather: with what force is one transported “by the pleasures and desires”? The ontology to which this ethics of sexual behavior referred was not, at least not in its general form, an ontology of deficiency and desire; it was not that of a nature setting the standard for acts; it was an ontology of a force that linked together acts, pleasures, and desires. (Foucault [1984a]: 43)

The Greeks were aware of the *forces* that sustain pleasure (in fact, Greek tragedians acutely demonstrated the overwhelming power of negativity). They knew, moreover, that the destruction of the subject comes often by their pleasure. Even if it is true, as Foucault argues, that the Greeks were not concerned about kinds of pleasure⁹, it

⁹ «In Antiquity people were very attentive to the elements of conduct and they wanted everybody to pay attention to them. But the modes of attention were not the same as those that came to be known later. Thus the sexual act itself, its morphology, the way in which one seeks and obtains one's pleasure, the “object” of desire, do not seem

is also true that they were insistent on the necessity of moderating their force. «The sexual act did not occasion anxiety because it was associated with evil but because it disturbed and threatened the individual's relationship with himself and his integrity as an ethical subject in the making; if it was not properly measured and distributed, it carried the threat of a breaking forth of involuntary forces, a lessening of energy, and death without honorable descendants» (Foucault [1984a]: 136-137). This is the reason why the Greeks and the Romans wrote numerous texts that sought to understand and control what psychoanalysis has subsequently defined as the drive. Indeed, as Foucault affirms, what is essential for Greek and Roman morality is to develop «a certain style of morality that is *self-control*. Sexual activity is represented, perceived as violence, and therefore problematized from the point of view of the difficulty there is in controlling it. Hubris is fundamental. In this ethics, one must constitute for oneself rules of conduct by which one will be able to ensure that self-control» (Foucault [1984b]: 261).

From this perspective, it is important to remember that ὕβρις is the most execrable sin for the Greeks. The *hybristes* is in fact the person who, driven by his or her own *daimon*, goes beyond the limits of his or her own human condition so far as to defy the gods. But what does it exactly mean to defy the gods for the Greek culture? It means to step outside the category to which one belongs in accord with nature (κατὰ φύσιν). When the forces that psychoanalysis labels as drive erupt from the unconscious, they overwhelm the subject, leading him or her to behave in a manner inconsistent with his or her own status. Extricating the person from him or herself, the forces end up pushing him or her outside the category to which he or she belongs. This is why they are so terrifying. «Some even advised to indulge only “if one wants to do harm to oneself”. A very ancient fear, there-

fore» concludes Foucault (Foucault [1984a]: 17). For this reason, the most important skill for the Greeks is to manage one's own forces or drives, to develop the ability to resist them¹⁰. Failing this imperative means being brought to one's own downfall. Therefore, what is important is not to renounce pleasure or turn away from all sexual activity but rather to manage its inherent and frightening “force”:

If it was necessary, as Plato said, to bridle it [sexual activity] with the three strongest restraints: fear, law, and true reason; if it was necessary, as Aristotle thought, for desire to obey reason the way a child obeyed his tutor; if Aristippus himself advised that, while it was all right to “use pleasures, one had to be careful not to be carried away by them” – the reason was not that sexual activity was a vice, nor that it might deviate from a canonical model; it was because sexual activity was associated with a force, an energeia, that was itself liable to be excessive. In the Christian doctrine of the flesh, the excessive force of pleasure had its principle in the Fall and in the weakness that had marked human nature ever since.

¹⁰ «These are almost the same words that Antiphon the Sophist employed on his own account: “He is not wise [*sôphrôn*] who has not tried the ugly and the bad; for then there is nothing he has conquered [*kratein*] and nothing that would enable him to assert that he is virtuous [*kosmios*]. “One could behave ethically only by adopting a combative attitude toward the pleasures. As we have seen, the aphrodisiacs were made not only possible but desirable by an interplay of forces whose origin and finality were natural, but whose potential, by the fact that they had their own energy, was for revolt and excess. These forces could not be used in the moderate way that was fitting unless one was capable of opposing, resisting, and subduing them. Of course, if it was necessary to confront them, this was because they were inferior appetites that humans happen to share – like hunger and thirst – with the animals; but this natural inferiority would not of itself be a reason for having to combat them, if there was not the danger that, winning out over all else, they would extend their rule over the whole individual, eventually reducing him to slavery. In other words, it was not their intrinsic nature, their disqualification on principle that necessitated this “polemical” attitude toward oneself, but their possible ascendancy and dominion» (Foucault [1984a]: 66).

to have been a very important theoretical problem in Antiquity. On the other hand, what was an object of preoccupation was the intensity of sexual activity, its rhythm, the moment chosen» (Foucault [1984b]: 260).

For classical Greek thought, this force was potentially excessive by nature, and the moral question was how to confront this force, how to control it and regulate its economy in a suitable way. (Foucault [1984a]: 50)

The *energeia* that drives sexual activity – a force produced, according to the Greeks, by pleasure *and* desire – is intrinsic to that activity and cannot be avoided. What the Greeks believed was possible was to learn how to manage this *energeia* in order to remain master of themselves. They believed that «the battle to be fought, the victory to be won, the defeat that one risked suffering, these were processes and events that took place between oneself and oneself. The adversaries the individual had to combat were not just within him or close by; they were part of him» (Foucault [1984a]: 67). This is the reason why in an interview with Rabinow and Dreyfus, Foucault admits that the question at stake in the moderation of pleasures that sustained the ethics of the Greeks was always: «Are you a slave of your own desires or their master?» (Foucault [1983]: 260).

CONCLUSION

Foucault's ethics, although aspiring to the creation of an *art de vivre* that could lead to a de-subjectivated *askēsis* of pleasure(s), arises from the ethics of the Greeks, an ethics concerned with a strong subjectivity able to moderate the forces driving sexual activity. It is true that, as we have seen, Foucault's return to the Greeks is not a return *strictu sensu*. On this regard, Deleuze rightly observes that «Foucault n'emploie pas le mot sujet comme personne ni comme forme d'identité, mais les mots "subjectivation" comme processus, et "Soi" comme rapport (rapport à soi).» But then he acutely adds: «Et de quoi s'agit-il? *Il s'agit d'un rapport de la force avec soi,*» unmasking the problem intrinsic in Foucault's anti-psychoanalytic perspective (Deleuze [1986b]: 127). What is this force against which the subject has to fight? What kind of force is it that, by operating inside the subject, resists its will and even imposes itself, up to threaten the subject's relation to his or her

pleasures? If Foucault's ethics constantly oscillates between an *askēsis* of pleasure(s) which leads to a de-subjectivated *art de vivre* and a care of those same pleasure(s) in order to remain master of himself, this is because Foucault, despite himself, ultimately shows that what really de-subjectivates the subject is not a willing pursuit of pleasure(s), but an unwilling fall into the abyss of the drives.

Therefore, even if we ignore either Bersani's critique, which reads S/M as the eroticization of power instead of a parodic performance that relaxes the fixation of its social structure (Bersani [1994]: 77-113); or Gratton's, which shows the «miraculously *unsullied*» quality of the notion of pleasure as theorized by Foucault (Gratton [2001]: 31-40); or Deleuze's, which shows that pleasure is not inherently extraneous to social constraints, (Deleuze [2003]: 112-123). we still reach the same conclusion. Even, that is, if we naively embrace the *askēsis* of pleasure(s) theorized by Foucault, and sustained by theorists of S/M (Califia [2003]; Weinberg, Levi Kamel [1983]; Mains 1984; Hopcke [1991]), we paradoxically arrive at the same point held by psychoanalysis – namely the inconsistency of the Cartesian subject in relation to his or her own drives¹¹. What is this passion described by Foucault but the *drive* or, to be more explicit, the *death drive*? Despite Foucault's resistance to psychoanalysis, what in fact emerges from the Foucauldian attempt to escape from psychology is nothing but a subject who encounters the de-subjectivized effect of the drives that undermine its putative sovereignty. What are the limit-experiences to which he refers in the interview with Trombadori if not the moment in which we are overwhelmed by forces that tug at and expropriate our sovereignty over the world and ourselves? Are not these moments precisely *those* that anti-philosophers such as Nietzsche, Bataille, and Blanchot, – and Foucault consequently – tried to

¹¹ Foucault had to admit that «Lacan brought up the fact that the theory of the unconscious is not compatible with a theory of the subject (in the Cartesian but also the phenomenological sense of the term)» (Foucault [1978a]: 251).

acknowledge? If the goal of Foucault's *askēsis* of pleasure is to «extricate yourself from yourself» [c'est dépendre de soi-même] (Foucault [1984a]: 8), then the issue does not concern pleasure(s) but what is beyond pleasure(s) – namely the drives.

Thus, even if we follow Foucault's attempt to establish a discourse other than psychoanalysis with which to articulate an ethics of sexuality, we cannot ignore Foucault's own unwitting return to the "force" that psychoanalysis recognizes as animating sexuality. Thanks to psychoanalysis, we understand that pleasure cannot be the reparative loophole by which we escape our desires. Indeed, pleasure is nothing but the other face of desire, and, like desire, it is a site in which the drives jeopardize the subject and his or her fantasy of sovereignty.

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