Foucault, Governmentality, and the Techniques of the Self

Daniele Lorenzini
University of Warwick

1. Introduction

In this chapter, I retrace the emergence of the notion of governmentality in Michel Foucault's work as both a way of prolonging his previous analyses of disciplinary and biopolitical power, and as a necessary condition for the development of his reflections on "ethics" and the techniques of the self. First, I show that the anatomo- and bio-political mechanisms of power that Foucault explores in the 1970s have a common goal: the *government* of human beings' (everyday) life in its multiple, interconnected dimensions (Section 2). I then argue that Foucault elaborates the notion of governmentality as a response to the objection according to which his power/knowledge framework makes any attempt at resistance ultimately pointless. His genealogy of the government of human beings emphasizes that the point of articulation and clash between power and resistance is to be situated at the level of what he calls "subjectivity," thus establishing a direct link between politics and ethics (Section 3). Indeed, defined as the contact point between coercion-technologies and self-technologies, subjectivity constitutes for Foucault both the main target of governmental mechanisms of power and the essential support for the enactment of counter-conducts and practices of freedom (Section 4). This, I argue, helps to explain the distinctively "anarchaeological"[1] flair of Foucault's lectures and writings post-1978: the study of governmentality goes hand in hand with the postulate of the non-necessity of all power, and hence with the ever-present possibility of critique and resistance. The *political* relevance of Foucault's so-called "turn to ethics," I claim, can only be understood in this light, since governmentality for him ultimately implies the relationship of self to self (Section 5).

2. The Archaeology of Governmentality

To situate the emergence of the notion of governmentality in Foucault's thought, I suggest that we take a step back and trace a brief archaeology of Foucault's own discourse on power, or better, of his analysis of power/knowledge mechanisms from the 1970s. My aim is to show that the notion of governmentality does not indicate a further modality of power, distinct from what Foucault calls disciplinary power and biopower; on the contrary, it encompasses both disciplinary and biopolitical technologies of power, while allowing Foucault to more clearly explore the strategies of resistance that have been and can be opposed to them.

As is well known, one of the main features of Foucault's analytics of power consists the critique of what he calls "sovereign power." This critique takes different forms—the first and most famous of which is organized around the contrast between the

---

[1] This is a neologism that Foucault coins in his 1979-1980 lecture course at the Collège de France, *On the Government of the Living* (2014, pp. 78-79).

"macrophysics of sovereignty" and the "microphysics of disciplinary power" (2006, p. 27). Disciplinary power, Foucault argues, aims "to gain access to the bodies of individuals, to their acts, attitudes, and modes of everyday behavior" in order to obtain "productive service from individuals in their concrete lives" (1980, p. 125). Foucault famously explores this modality of power in his 1973-1974 lecture course at the Collège de France, *Psychiatric Power* (2006), as well as in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), against the background, respectively, of the history of psychiatry and the emergence of the prison in the nineteenth century.[2] Foucault's aim when analyzing the emergence and development of disciplinary power in modern society is not, however, to construe it as the archetype of all modalities of modern power. In other words, his goal is not to replace the Sovereign-Law paradigm with another paradigm which would play an analogous role in political theory—the role of a universal principle of explanation. Foucault's genealogical inquiries from the 1970s are rather intended as a remedy for our theoretical and historical "blindness": they make us *see* power and resistance "in a different light by addressing the multiplicity of power relations that innervate the daily life of individuals and that political theory has generally failed to consider. In 1978, a few months after coining the notion of governmentality, Foucault characterizes this move as a Wittgensteinian-Austinian one: much as ordinary language philosophers carry out "a critical analysis of thought on the basis of the way one says things," Foucault conceives of his own work as an "analytico-political philosophy," that is, "a philosophy that would have as its task the analysis of what ordinarily happens in power relations, a philosophy that would seek to show what these relations of power are about, what their forms, stakes, and objectives are" (2018, pp. 192-193). Foucault thus brings political theory back to the ordinary[3]—focusing on the analysis of everyday power relations, on the concrete exercise of power and ordinary strategies of resistance. This reorientation or "conversion" of our gaze toward the ways in which power and resistance *ordinarily* work and shape individual lives constitutes the common thread that unifies the different aspects of Foucault's analytics of power—from his analyses of disciplines and biopower to the introduction of the notion of governmentality. It is also, I argue, what allows us to understand his much debated (and misunderstood) "turn to ethics," which is all but a turn away from politics, as I will show.

In his analysis of disciplinary power, Foucault argues that the latter, through a daily "*penalization of existence*" (2015a, p. 193), exerts "a total hold, or, at any rate, tends to be an exhaustive capture of the individual's body, actions, time, and behavior" (2006, p. 46). By "capturing" the body and life of the individual, disciplinary power is doubly *productive*: not only it fabricates subjected bodies, but its "punitive and continuous action on potential behavior" also projects, "behind the body itself, […] something like a psyche" (p. 52). In other words, disciplinary power produces individuals by attaching the "subject-function" to a somatic singularity (p. 55), thus creating the "soul" as the effect and instrument of its own exercise—"the soul, prison of the body" (1977, p. 30). The upshot of this new way of conceiving of the functioning of power is that the individual can no longer be thought of as a trans-historical constant; instead, it becomes the "historical correlative" of a set of power mechanisms and, as we shall see, of techniques of the self (2016, p. 76). There is thus no point for Foucault "in wanting to dismantle hierarchies,

---

[2] It should be noted, however, that Foucault's interest in disciplinary power first emerges in his analysis of the "punitive society" during his 1972-1973 lecture course at the Collège de France (2015a, pp. 237-241).
[3] See Wittgenstein (2009, §116, p. 53e): "What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use."

constraints, and prohibitions so that the individual can appear, as if the individual was something existing beneath all relationships of power, preexisting relationships of power, and unduly weighed down by them" (p. 56). The individual is both an effect of power and its relay: "power passes through the individual it has constituted" (2003b, p. 30).

Disciplinary power relies on three main strategies to produce subjugated subjects: a generalized and constant *surveillance* (police, archives, panopticism); a *discipline* of life, time, energies (isolation, grouping, and localization of bodies to obtain an optimal use of forces); a *normalization* of individuals (definition of the "normal," exclusion of the "abnormal," corrective interventions). These three dimensions of disciplinary power, even in their specificity, have a common target and "point of application": the life of human beings. "Life" here should not be conceived as an abstract entity or philosophical concept, however, nor as pure and simple biological existence or "bare life" (Agamben, 1998), but as the complex, material combination of all the *qualifiable* dimensions of human existence: biological, of course, but also social, cultural, ethical, and political.[4] In short, what the ancients called *bios*: "When the Greeks speak of *bios*," Foucault explains, and they claim that it "must be the object of a *teknē*, it is understood that they do not mean 'life' in the biological sense of the term" (2017, p. 251). Indeed, "*bios* may be good or bad, whereas the life one leads because one is a living being is simply given to you by nature": *bios* encompasses both aspects, that of necessity (certain things just happen to you, such as for instance the fact of being born in a certain body and context, of growing up in a certain way, etc.) and that of freedom, because you still have the possibility of changing some things and transforming your existence, at least in part (p. 34). Consequently, *bios* constitutes not only the target and point of application of disciplinary mechanisms of power—one that they aim to shape and manage in detail— but also the fundamental correlate of the techniques of the self that allow one to modify one's life.

Disciplinary power, however, is not the only modality of power that has *bios* as its main target. Another set of power mechanisms, different but complementary to this "art of the human body" (1977, p. 137), this "political anatomy of detail" or "discipline of the minute" (pp. 139-140), constitute what Foucault calls biopower or biopolitics. The theme of biopolitics has been widely developed by scholars such as Agamben (1998), Negri and Hardt (2000), Esposito (2008), and others, who have tended to construe it as sharply distinct from Foucault's analyses of disciplinary power and governmentality.[5] But in fact biopolitics is consistently presented by Foucault as the *correlative* of disciplinary power (1977, p. 190). *Together*, these two modalities of power aim at "generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them," or in other words, at managing the life (*bios*) of

---

[4] As Georges Canguilhem aptly remarks, "human life can have a biological meaning, a social meaning, and an existential meaning"—which can *only artificially* be separated one from the other: "A human being does not live only like a tree or a rabbit" (2008, pp. 121-122). According to Foucault, the very notion of "biological life" is the *effect* (and not the original, independent substratum) of a scientific discourse that should be analyzed historically (Chomsky and Foucault, 2006, p. 6). For a convincing critique of the attempt to "de-historicize" the concepts of (human) nature and life, see Revel (2008).

[5] Within the field of governmentality studies, scholars have tended to follow Deleuze (1992) and argue that we no longer live in disciplinary societies but in societies of control, therefore discarding Foucault's analyses of disciplinary power and exclusively focusing on the link biopower-governmentality. This is true even of those who correctly read Foucault as claiming that, by the nineteenth century, the distinction between disciplines and regulations blurs; see, e.g., Rose (2007, 53, 223). For a helpful corrective, see Bargu (2014).

human beings in its multiple dimensions, both at the level of the individual and at that of the population (1978, pp. 136-137). As Foucault clearly argues:

> In concrete terms, starting in the seventeenth century, this power over life evolved in two basic forms; these forms were not antithetical, however; they constituted rather two poles of development linked together by a whole intermediary cluster of relations. One of these poles—the first to be formed, it seems—centered on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls, all this was ensured by the procedures of power that characterized the *disciplines: an anatomo-politics of the human body*. The second, formed somewhat later, focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary. Their supervision was effected through an entire series of interventions and *regulatory controls: a bio-politics of the population*. (p. 139)

The disciplines of the individual body and the regulations of the population thus constitute the two main poles around which a power over life was organized, in the nineteenth century, aiming to manage the *bios* of human beings both individually and collectively—a power which, Foucault notes, played a fundamental role in the development of capitalism (pp. 140-141). This "bio-power" relies on scientific and statistical tools to include in its field of knowledge and control the biological dimension of the life of human groups, but its overall aim remains that of forging, transforming, and subjugating *each and every* somatic singularity. If the biopolitics of the population constitutes as an object of power/knowledge the human being in his specificity of *living being* (2003b, p. 239), Foucault argues that it still needs to be supported and supplemented by a set of anatomo-political (disciplinary) technologies that invest "the body, health, modes of subsistence and habitation, living conditions, the whole space of existence" (1978, pp. 143-144): "managing the population" does not mean "just managing the collective mass of phenomena or managing them simply at the level of their overall results," but managing the population "in depth, in all its fine points and details" (2007a, p. 107).

Thus, as the management of the Covid-19 pandemic has clearly shown, the biopolitical technologies of power which apply to the population the massifying instruments of statistics, demographics, health and urban planning, and economic regulation, always need to be combined and supplemented by disciplinary mechanisms of power which allow to shape the daily existence of individuals in order to control, maximize, and extract their forces while making them docile (2003b, p. 242). Foucault's analytico-political philosophy does not separate but brings together these two complementary dimensions of the power over life: only at the level of their *articulation*[6] one can grasp the actual morphology of the power relations that innervate our everyday existence. This is because the anatomo- and bio-political mechanisms of power have a common goal: the *government* of human beings' life in its multiple, interconnected dimensions.

---

[6] As Foucault argues, "the two sets of mechanisms—one disciplinary and the other regulatory—do not exist at the same level. Which means of course that they are not mutually exclusive and can be articulated with each other" (2003b, p. 250).

3. The Genealogy of Governmentality

The theme of the government of human beings and their life, at the level both of the individual body and of the population, is therefore already present in Foucault's analytics of power pre-1978. In 1975, for instance, Foucault explicitly talks of an "art of governing" in the context of his analysis of disciplinary power and its normalizing function (2003a, pp. 48-49). Consequently, the introduction of the notion of governmentality in *Security, Territory, Population* (2007a) does not constitute a radical rupture vis-à-vis Foucault's previous analyses of disciplinary and biopolitical power, as it has often been claimed. Instead, it is for him a way of clarifying and developing those analyses further, while also breaking a deadlock he found himself stuck in. The elaboration of the power/knowledge framework had led Foucault to redefine the concepts of power and resistance, and to famously claim that "where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (1978, p. 95). If this is the case, however, if power is everywhere and even *constitutes* individual subjects, is resistance not ultimately pointless—an empty dream—insofar as one will always be "trapped" in a net of power relations (2001a)?

It is to respond to this objection, while remaining faithful to his previous analyses of power and resistance, that in 1978 Foucault elaborates the notion of governmentality (2007a, pp. 108-110). Little did he know, at the time, that this notion would not only allow him to inaugurate the project of a genealogy of the government of human beings, but also lead him to go back in time way further than he had originally planned: from the study of the *raison d'État* and the liberal and neoliberal arts of government between the seventeenth and the twentieth centuries, through Medieval "pastoral power" and "counter-conducts" (pp. 163-226), to early Christianity and Greco-Roman antiquity. This genealogical inquiry into the different ways of governing human beings thus provides us with the key to understanding Foucault's interest in the ancient techniques of the self and the practice of *parrēsia* as an integral part of (and not a rupture with) his analysis of governmentality and the critical attitude from the late 1970s. But how exactly does Foucault define governmentality? And how does this notion allow him to respond to the aforementioned objection?

In *Security, Territory, Population*, when introducing the notion of governmentality, Foucault characterizes it in a somewhat ambiguous way. On the one hand, he claims that he will use this notion to indicate the very specific (modern) modality of power "that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument" (p. 108). The analysis of this specifically modern form of power will show, Foucault argues, that what is relevant is less "the State's takeover [*étatisation*] of society" than "the 'governmentalization' of the State," thanks to which the latter has survived while becoming an agent—a very important one, of course—within a more general set of governmental mechanisms (p. 109). On the other hand, however, governmentality also defines for Foucault a historical "tendency" or a "line of force" that has characterized "the West" for a very long time, thus allowing us to explain the "pre-eminence" of a form of power/knowledge that consists in the "government" of human beings (p. 108). This tendency, that in 1978 Foucault traces back to the Middle Ages and the organization of the Christian pastorate, will subsequently be discovered in early Christianity and Greco-Roman antiquity too, due to

Foucault's focus—starting in 1980—on the problem of government now understood in the *broad* sense "of mechanisms and procedures intended to conduct human beings, to direct their conduct, to conduct their conduct" (2014, p. 12). It is thus the second, more general sense of governmentality that, after the analyses developed in *Security, Territory, Population* (2007a) and *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008), will retain Foucault's attention in the last five years of his life.

In many important respects, however, this broader sense of governmentality was already crucial for Foucault in 1978. Indeed, although the concept of government is a polymorphous one, which can be applied to a variety of things—in the sixteenth century, for instance, one would "govern" a household, a family, a province, a convent, a religious order, souls, children, etc. (2007a, p. 93)—in *Security, Territory, Population* Foucault maintains that in fact one always "governs" *a group of people* in their relationships with other people and with things (p. 96). Foucault locates the roots of the idea and practice of governing human beings in the organization of a "pastoral" power, where the king, god, or chief are seen as shepherds who govern their subjects as a flock. First, the shepherd does not exercise their power over a territory, but over a multiplicity of human beings in movement. Second, the power of the shepherd is essentially beneficent and curative, because it aims to ensure the salvation of the flock. And third, this power takes the form of a duty, a service carried out through the shepherd's zeal, devotion, and concern for the flock (pp. 125-128). Pastoral power is therefore an "individualizing power" because it is exercised over a collective entity (the flock as a whole) only by being exercised over each sheep individually—only through the government of each sheep in its singularity. *Omnes et singulatim*: the shepherd can govern and "save" the flock only "insofar as not a single sheep escapes him" (p. 128). Consequently, the shepherd must know each sheep, make sure it is healthy, watch over its daily conduct to avoid that it gets lost, check in the evening whether it has returned home—thus contributing to the shaping of each individual on whom they exercise their solicitude.

Foucault claims that, through the institutional mediation of the Christian Church, pastoral power has progressively extended its reach, to the point of becoming the matrix of many governmental mechanisms of power that are still in use in contemporary Western society (p. 148). The Christian pastorate has organized a whole set of tools and strategies for the government of human beings "in their daily life and in the details and materiality of their existence" (p. 149), an "art of conducting, directing, leading, guiding, taking in hand, and manipulating [human beings], an art of monitoring them and urging them on step by step, an art with the function of taking charge of [human beings] collectively and individually throughout their life and at every moment of their existence" (p. 165). After many centuries in which it remained essentially linked to the ecclesiastical institution, this modality of power started being integrated into the field of the State and its structures during the eighteenth century. Its individualizing function, Foucault argues, was thus able to reach the entire social body thanks to a multiplicity of old and new institutions (family, education, justice, medicine, psychiatry, etc.), but of course after undergoing a series of modifications. First, a change of objective: the goal was no longer to lead human beings to salvation in the other world, but to ensure that they obtain it in this world in the form of health, security, protection against accidents, etc. Second, a strengthening of the administration and a multiplication of the individualizing instances of power: the police, of course, but also welfare societies, private insurances, benefactors, etc. Finally, a development of knowledge about the human being around two poles: "one,

globalizing and quantitative, concerning the population; the other, analytical, concerning the individual" (2001c, p. 335). Anatomo- and bio-politics—the circle is closed.

One of the fundamental objectives of Foucault's analytico-political philosophy, no matter whether it focuses on disciplinary power, on biopolitics, or more generally on governmentality, is therefore to show that, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the individual became—and no doubt still is—"an essential concern for power" (2018, p. 199). Modern technologies of power all have individualizing effects, according to Foucault, because they turn the individual, his or her behavior and daily life, into "an event that is relevant, even necessary, indispensable for the exercise of power" (p. 199). The modern State, Foucault claims, has always been "both individualizing and totalitarian"; consequently, "opposing the individual and his interests to it is just as hazardous as opposing it with the community and its requirements" (2001b, p. 325). The libertarian solution is just as unsatisfactory as the communitarian one. What Foucault's genealogy of the government of human beings in Western society contributes to emphasize is thus the necessity to redefine the point of contact, articulation, and clash between power and resistance. The name that Foucault ends up giving to such a point of contact and clash is "subjectivity." Hence, Foucault's introduction of the notion of governmentality and his (genealogical) focus on the problem of the government of human beings lead him to reject the all too rigid boundaries usually drawn between the fields of politics and ethics, while also providing a more convincing response to the aforementioned objection. If we define "subjectivity" as "the set of processes of subjectivation to which individuals have been subjected or that they have implemented with regard to themselves" (2017, p. 282), then resistance can newly be conceived as a strategic practice of desubjugation (*désassujettissement*) and re-subjectivation (*subjectivation*) within the framework of the government of self and others.

4. Critical Attitude and the Techniques of the Self

In *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault famously focuses on the notion of "conduct," which he takes to be coextensive with that of government and which he considers particularly helpful because of its threefold meaning: not only one can conduct someone else or be conducted by someone else, but one can also conduct *oneself* (2007a, p. 193). As Arnold Davidson (2011) aptly remarks, this is the moment in which Foucault explicitly inaugurates the ethical dimension of his work—if we accept to define "ethics" as the theoretico-practical domain that is concerned with the reflexive elaboration of the relationship of self to self. Two years later, in his lectures at Dartmouth College, Foucault offers an original characterization of the concept of government based precisely on the intertwining of these different modalities of conduct:

> The contact point, where the way individuals are driven by others is tied to the way they conduct themselves, is what we can call, I think, government. Governing people, in the broad meaning of the word, is not a way to force people to do what the governor wants; it is always a versatile equilibrium, with complementarity and conflicts between techniques which assure coercion and processes through which the self is constructed or modified by himself. (2016, pp. 25-26)

It is in that context that Foucault first coins the notion of techniques of the self (p. 25). The analytics of power that Foucault developed in the 1970s now seems to be too narrowly focused on "techniques of domination," as if government could be simply reduced to the operation(s) of conducting the conduct of *others*; this risks construing power as "pure violence or strict coercion," whereas Foucault has always wanted to characterize it as a set of "complex relations" involving "rational techniques" that he now describes in terms of the "subtle integration of coercion-technologies and self-technologies" (p. 25). One can therefore distinguish four major types of techniques in human societies:[7] techniques of production, techniques of signification, techniques of domination, and techniques of the self—i.e., those techniques that "permit individuals to effect, by their own means or with the help of other people, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, on their own souls, on their own thoughts, on their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, or to attain a certain state of perfection, of happiness, of purity, of supernatural power, and so on" (p. 25). The introduction of the notion of techniques of the self and the new focus on subjectivity as the contact point between coercion-technologies and self-technologies thus show that the objection Foucault was facing in the mid-1970s—how can resistance be possible if it is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power?—was misplaced. Governmentality in its broad sense encompasses *both* techniques of domination and techniques of the self, emphasizing the multiple ways in which techniques aimed at conducting others and techniques aimed at conducting oneself *interact*, that is, oppose or reinforce each other. The question therefore becomes: how can we modify the interplay between—and respective strategic importance of—techniques of domination and techniques of the self in a given situation, in order to counter-act as effectively as possible the effects of coercion, but aware of the fact that it will never be possible to extricate oneself from *all* power relations?

Foucault's elaboration of the notions of critical attitude and critical ontology of ourselves between 1978 and 1984 constitutes, I argue, a way of responding to this question. To understand why, it is crucial to refer once again to his analyses of the government of human beings. According to Foucault, governmental mechanisms of power can only function by relying on the freedom of the individual: far from depriving the latter of his or her free will, they incite him or her to engage in processes of subjectivation whose aim is to constitute *voluntarily* subjugated subjects. This is true not only in the case of pastoral power (see Lorenzini, 2016, pp. 12-17) but also, and *a fortiori*, in the case of liberal and neoliberal governmentality: the latter, Foucault argues, construe individual freedom as no longer simply "the right of individuals legitimately opposed to the power, usurpations, and abuses of the sovereign or the government," but more importantly as "an element that has become indispensable to governmentality itself"— for "a condition of governing well is that freedom, or certain forms of freedom, are really respected" (2007a, p. 353). Thus, individual freedom is no longer merely *exploited*, like in pastoral power, but concretely *produced*.

In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault defines liberalism and neoliberalism as specific forms of the art of governing human beings; however, while in the context of the Christian pastorate the shepherd's power over their subjects, albeit based on the latter's perpetual

---

[7] Foucault here uses the word "techniques" to indicate "ordered procedures, considered [*réfléchies*] ways of doing things that are intended to carry out a certain number of transformations on a determinate object"— or subject (2017, p. 251).

consent to be conducted, was *unlimited*, the limitation (or better, *self*-limitation) of government becomes crucial in the liberal and neoliberal art of governing. Consequently, far from being a necessary but nevertheless dangerous condition of the exercise of governmental power, individual freedoms here become themselves a tool to govern human beings more effectively (Lorenzini, 2018). In short, liberalism and neoliberalism govern human beings *through* their freedom—and *for* the market, since of course the most fundamental freedom remains that of the market (Foucault, 2008, p. 121). They do not just respect or guarantee a greater or lesser number of freedoms, but incessantly produce, organize, and consume freedom (p. 63). Foucault therefore argues that freedom "is not a universal which is particularized in time and geography," it is not "a white surface with more or less numerous black spaces here and there and from time to time," but "a current relation between those who govern and those who are governed"—one that is defined by a constant struggle over the "too little" of existing freedom and the demand of "even more" freedom (p. 63, trans. mod.). The upshot of these analyses is that individual freedom is (re)defined, not as the irreducible adversary of power, but as the necessary condition for its exercise—that which ensures the functioning of the governmental apparatuses. Of course, Foucault does not want to erase the significant differences that exist between pastoral power and liberal and neoliberal governmentality: while in the first case the freedom of the individual remains intact only to be better obliterated (since it is reduced to the mere fact of *consenting* to be indefinitely governed), in the second case it is safeguarded, encouraged, produced, organized, and consumed within a complex dynamic that pertains to a completely different governmental rationality. However, Foucault makes clear that all forms of governmentality ultimately rely on an original consent that the individual has to reiterate incessantly—on an "I want" (to be governed, directed, conducted *in this way*), which constitutes not only the basis of their alleged legitimacy but also the secret of their effectiveness.

It should therefore not come as a surprise that Foucault's definition of the critical attitude focuses precisely on the possibility of saying "I no longer want" (to be governed, directed, conducted *in this way*), of withdrawing one's consent to be governed in this specific way: critique becomes for Foucault the "will not to be governed thusly, like that, by these people, at this cost" (2015b, p. 65). One must of course carefully avoid interpreting this "will" in light of a traditional (philosophical or metaphysical) conception of the will. In fact, rather than of "will," it would perhaps be more appropriate to speak of "decision" or, better still, "effort" (2014, p. 77), in the same way in which, instead of "freedom," Foucault prefers to use the expression "practices of freedom" (1997c, 282-283). In both cases, it is the singularity and specificity of a given situation, of a certain configuration of power relations and type of governmental practice, that give a singular and specific form to the effort that one can make and the practices of freedom that one can implement, concretely, in order to conduct oneself *differently*. This is what Foucault will end up calling "critical ontology of ourselves" (1984a, 50).

5. Subjectivity, Truth, Ethics

When replacing the notion of subjectivity at the heart of his analysis of governmentality, Foucault makes also clear that he wants to redefine the conceptual couple power/knowledge in the direction of the problem of the "government of [human beings]

by the truth" (2014, p. 11). Western society, he argues, has organized in the course of its history a complex system of relations between the government of human beings, the manifestation of the truth in the form of subjectivity, and the promise of "salvation" for each and all (p. 75). Unsurprisingly, Foucault refuses to address this system of relations in terms of ideology. The problem, for him, is not that "inasmuch as human beings worry more about salvation in the other world than about what happens down here, inasmuch as they want to be saved, they remain quiet and peaceful and it is easier to govern them" (p. 75). Instead, Foucault suggests to analyze governmental apparatuses as "regimes of truth" (p. 93),[8] thus developing what he calls an "(an)archaeology of knowledge" that focuses on "the types of relations that link together manifestations of truth with their procedures and the subjects who are their operators, witnesses, or possibly objects" (p. 100). By conducting an analysis in terms of regimes of truth and refusing to establish a clear-cut distinction between scientific knowledge and ideologies, Foucault aims to emphasize the specific ways "of linking the manifestation of truth and the subject who carries it out," and to show us that this link always functions as a support for operations pertaining to the government of human beings (p. 100). Thus, during the last few years of his life, Foucault's analysis of governmentality has a specific target: the multiple ways in which human beings have been and still are governed by the truth, that is, the ways in which a given set of truths—religious, cultural, political, scientific, medical, etc.—have exerted and still exert on them a "force" that turns out to be instrumental to conduct their conduct. This apparently new methodological perspective actually builds on Foucault's claims in "What is Critique?": the anarchaeology of knowledge is nothing but the instantiation of an "attitude" relying on the postulate that "no power, of whatever kind, is obvious or inevitable," that no power has an "intrinsic legitimacy" (pp. 77-78). It is a form of the critical attitude defined by "the movement of freeing oneself from power," of wanting to be governed *otherwise*—one that shares with anarchy the theoretico-practical postulate of "the non-acceptability of power" and the (conditional) imperative to call into question "all the ways in which power is in actual fact accepted" (p. 78). In other words, Foucault's anarchaeological analysis of the government of human beings by the truth is *itself* "a theoretico-practical attitude concerning the non-necessity of all power" (p. 78), an exercise in desubjugation (*désassujettissement*) within the context of a "politics of truth" (2015b, p. 39).

    This conclusion allows us to more clearly understand that Foucault's so-called "turn to ethics"—his "Greco-Latin '*trip*'" (2012, p. 2)—is in fact to be situated in direct continuity with his analyses of governmentality. It is true that what interests Foucault in ancient philosophy is the centrality of questions such as: "How ought I to live?, or What should my life be like?" (Annas, 1995, p. 27), and the idea that human life in all of its aspects can be not only the object of a theoretical reflection, but also that of a practical elaboration. This has an immediately *political* relevance for Foucault: to consider our *bios* as a "matter" that, while being constantly shaped by governmental mechanisms of power, the individual can also modify thanks to a series of techniques of the self, means for Foucault to open up the possibility of conceiving of "ethics" as a practical effort of transformation of our relations to ourselves, the others, and society as a whole. From this perspective, Foucault's claim that "*bios* is Greek subjectivity" (2017, p. 253) is even more remarkable.

---

[8] On this notion, see Lorenzini (2015).

Ethics is thus the name that Foucault gives to the complex task consisting in changing, modifying, transfiguring our relation to ourselves—that is, our way of living and being, or our subjectivity. Consequently, ethics for Foucault always has a *critical potential*: it is the "art of living" only insofar as it can also be the art of *no longer* living in this way, that is, of *no longer* being governed thusly. If Foucault's analytico-political philosophy aims to address the multiple ways in which life (*bios*) is caught up in and shaped by a set of governmental mechanisms of power, ethics is its "flipside" and necessary correlative, as it consists in the effort to transform this "subjugated" life and create *other* forms of subjectivation. As Foucault argues:

> Maybe the main objective nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are. We have to imagine and to build up what we could be to get rid of this kind of political "double bind," which is the simultaneous individualization and totalization of modem power structures. The conclusion would be that the political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the State, and from the State's institutions, but for us to liberate *ourselves* both from the State and from the type of individualization linked to it. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality that has been imposed on us for several centuries. (2001c, p. 336, trans. mod.)

Foucault's interest in ancient ethics and the techniques of the self can only be understood in light of this critical and political task. What interests Foucault, in other words, are the forms that has taken and can take the effort to transform one's own *bios*— to change one's way of living and being, to modify what one knows and does, and to try to think and act "differently" (1990, pp. 8-9). Thus, it is not a matter of *reviving* ancient ethical principles or practices, but of realizing that ancient Greece offers us the example of a society in which the latter were not linked to a religion, or to a juridical structure, or to science, as it is the case in our modern society. This means that "ethics can be a very strong structure of existence, without any relation with the juridical per se, with an authoritarian system, with a disciplinary structure" (1984b, p. 348). Consequently, it *is* possible to build "a new ethics," and with it new forms of subjectivity, that would not be linked to religion, law, or science, but that would constitute the unpredictable outcome of the exercise of what Foucault calls our "ethical imagination" (2015c, p. 143). Ethics would then play the role of a practice of freedom—or better, as Foucault famously claims, a "reflected practice of freedom" (1997c, p. 284, trans. mod.).

In 1983, Foucault claims, perhaps a bit ironically, that what interests him "is much more morals than politics or, in any case, politics as an ethics," that is, as an *ethos*, a way of living and being (1984c, p. 375). Indeed, while in his books Foucault had "especially wanted to question politics, and to bring to light in the political field, as in the field of historical and philosophical interrogation, some problems that had not been recognized there before" (p. 375), the crucial (ethico-political) issue that his work post-1978 has brought to the fore is that of the ways in which individuals are constituted *and* constitute themselves as subjects—both as the fundamental target of governmental mechanisms of power and as a strategic place for the elaboration of practices of freedom. It is not surprising, then, that Foucault ends up claiming that constituting an ethics of the self "may be an urgent, fundamental, and politically indispensable task" (2005, p. 252). Not, of course, because "the *only* possible point of resistance to political power […] lies in the relationship of the self to the self" (1997c, pp. 299-300, my emphasis), but because

"governmentality" implies the relationship of the self to itself, and I intend this concept of "governmentality" to cover the whole range of practices that constitute, define, organize, and instrumentalize the strategies that individuals in their freedom can use in dealing with each other. Those who try to control, determine, and limit the freedom of others are themselves free individuals who have at their disposal certain instruments they can use to govern others. […] I believe that the concept of governmentality makes it possible to bring out the freedom of the subject and its relationship to others which constitutes the very stuff [*matière*] of ethics. (p. 300)

Consequently, ethics as the elaboration and transformation of the relationship of self to self has for Foucault a crucial political value that one can always exploit, in specific and strategically singular ways, in order to "work on ourselves and invent—I do not say discover—a manner of being that is still improbable" (1997a, p. 137).

6. Conclusion

Throughout his career, Foucault has consistently claimed that one must never accept "anything as definitive, sacrosanct, self-evident, or fixed" (2016, p. 127). His (an)archaeologico-genealogical analysis of governmentality aims precisely to incite us to question everything that is given to us as universal, necessary, and obligatory (1984a, p. 45)—in particular when it comes to the ways in which we are conducted and we conduct ourselves. Thus, by elaborating an ethics of immanence which does not rely on any transcendent or absolute principle, but which makes "discomfort" its watchword (2007b) in order to "render immobility mobile" (Davidson, 2010, p. 464), Foucault also elaborated a *politics* of immanence and discomfort, one that is not based on universal theorems but that aims at every moment "to determine which is the main danger" and to invent strategies to confront it (1984b, p. 343). Foucault once described this ethico-political attitude as an "hyper- and pessimistic activism" which does not suggest that "everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous"—and so that "we always have something to do" (p. 343). Far from being inevitably "trapped" by power, Foucault thinks that we are always in a strategic situation toward each other, and hence that—even though "we cannot jump *outside*" of it, even though we will never be absolutely free "from all power relations"—we have always the possibility of transforming our situation (1997b, p. 167). This transformation can, and normally does, begin with the transformation of ourselves.

References

Agamben, G. (1998) *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, translated by D. Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Annas J. (1995) *The Morality of Happiness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bargu, B. (2014) *Starve and Immolate: The Politics of Human Weapons*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Canguilhem, G. (2008) *Knowledge of Life*, edited by P. Marrati and T. Meyers, translated by S. Geroulanos and D. Ginsburg. New York: Fordham University Press.

Chomsky, N. and Foucault, M. (2006) *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate: On Human Nature*. New York: The New Press.

Davidson, A.I. (2010) 'Foucault, le perfectionnisme et la tradition des exercises spirituels' in Laugier, S. (ed.) *La voix et la vertu: Variétés du perfectionnisme moral*. Paris: PUF, pp. 449-467.

Davidson, A. I. (2011) 'In praise of counter-conduct', *History of the Human Sciences*, 24(4), pp. 25-41.

Deleuze, G. (1992) 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', *October*, 59, pp. 3-7.

Esposito, R. (2008) *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, translated by T. C. Campbell. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by A. Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books.

Foucault, M. (1978) *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, translated by R. Hurley. New York: Pantheon Books.

Foucault, M. (1980) 'Truth and power' in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, edited by C. Gordon, translated by C. Gordon et al. New York: Pantheon Books, pp. 109-133.

Foucault, M. (1984a) 'What is Enlightenment?' in *The Foucault Reader*, edited by P. Rabinow, translated by C. Porter. New York: Pantheon Books, pp. 32-50.

Foucault, M. (1984b) 'On the genealogy of ethics: An overview of work in progress' in *The Foucault Reader*, edited by P. Rabinow. New York: Pantheon Books, pp. 340-372.

Foucault, M. (1984c) 'Politics and ethics: An interview' in *The Foucault Reader*, edited by P. Rabinow, translated by C. Porter. New York: Pantheon Books, pp. 373-380.

Foucault, M. (1990) *The Use of Pleasure: Volume 2 of The History of Sexuality*, translated by R. Hurley. New York: Vintage Books.

Foucault, M. (1997a) 'Friendship as a way of life' in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, edited by P. Rabinow, translated by R. Hurley et al. New York: The New Press, pp. 135-140.

Foucault, M. (1997b) 'Sex, power, and the politics of identity' in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, edited by P. Rabinow, translated by R. Hurley et al. New York: The New Press, pp. 163-173.

Foucault, M. (1997c) 'The ethics of the concern of the self as a practice of freedom' in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, edited by P. Rabinow, translated by R. Hurley et al. New York: The New Press, pp. 281-301.

Foucault, M. (2001a) 'Précisions sur le pouvoir: Réponses à certaines critiques' in *Dits et écrits II, 1976-1988*, edited by D. Defert and F. Ewald. Paris: Gallimard, pp. 625-635.

Foucault, M. (2001b) '"*Omnes et singulatim*": Toward a Critique of Political Reason' in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, edited by J. D. Faubion, translated by R. Hurley et al. New York: The New Press, pp. 298-325.

Foucault, M. (2001c) 'The subject and power' in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, edited by J. D. Faubion, translated by R. Hurley et al. New York: The New Press, pp. 326-348.

Foucault, M. (2003a) *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-1975*, edited by V. Marchetti and A. Salomoni, translated by G. Burchell. London: Verso.

Foucault, M. (2003b) *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, edited by M. Bertani and A. Fontana, translated by D. Macey. New York: Picador.

Foucault, M. (2005) *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-1982*, edited by F. Gros, translated by G. Burchell. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Foucault, M. (2006) *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1973-1974*, edited by J. Lagrange, translated by G. Burchell. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Foucault, M. (2007a) *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978*, edited by M. Senellart, translated by G. Burchell. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Foucault, M. (2007b) 'For an ethics of discomfort' in *The Politics of Truth*, edited by S. Lotringer, translated by L. Hochroth. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), pp. 121-127.

Foucault, M. (2008) *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*, edited by M. Senellart, translated by G. Burchell. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Foucault, M. (2012) *The Courage of Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1983-1984*, edited by F. Gros, translated by G. Burchell. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Foucault, M. (2014) *On the Government of the Living: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1979-1980*, edited by M. Senellart, translated by G. Burchell. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Foucault, M. (2015a) *The Punitive Society: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1972-1973*, edited by B. E. Harcourt, translated by G. Burchell. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Foucault, M. (2015b) 'Qu'est-ce que la critique?' in *Qu'est-ce que la critique? Suivi de La culture de soi*, edited by H.-P. Fruchaud and D. Lorenzini. Paris: Vrin, pp. 33-70.

Foucault, M. (2015c) 'Débat au département d'histoire de l'Université de Californie à Berkeley' in *Qu'est-ce que la critique? Suivi de La culture de soi*, edited by H.-P. Fruchaud and D. Lorenzini. Paris: Vrin, pp. 127-148.

Foucault, M. (2016) *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Lectures at Dartmouth College, 1980*, edited by H.-P. Fruchaud and D. Lorenzini, translated by G. Burchell. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Foucault, M. (2017) *Subjectivity and Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1980-1981*, edited by F. Gros, translated by G. Burchell. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Foucault, M. (2018) 'The analytic philosophy of politics', translated by G. Mascaretti, *Foucault Studies*, 24, pp. 188-200.

Lorenzini, D. (2015) 'What is a "regime of truth"?', *Le Foucaldien*, 1(1) [online]. Available at: http://doi.org/10.16995/lefou.2 (Accessed: 20 February 2021).

Lorenzini, D. (2016) 'From counter-conduct to critical attitude: Michel Foucault and the art of not being governed quite so much', *Foucault Studies*, 21, pp. 7-21.

Lorenzini, D. (2018) 'Governmentality, subjectivity, and the neoliberal form of life', *Journal for Cultural Research*, 22(2), pp. 154-166.

Negri, A. and Hardt, M. (2000) *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Revel, J. (2008) 'Identità, natura, vita: tre decostruzioni biopolitiche' in Galzigna, M. (ed.) *Foucault, oggi*. Milano: Feltrinelli, pp. 134-149.

Rose, N. (2007) *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Wittgenstein, L. (2009) *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and J. Schulte. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.