“Pragmatic Humanism” in Foucault’s Later Work

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Introduction

The claim made here is that criticisms regarding Foucault’s lack of a normative grounding miss a crucial set of arguments he makes concerning the efficacy of liberation movements as ethical practices that seek to transgress present limits through practices of self-mastery and interaction with others who share certain historical experiences. I also argue that Foucault’s pragmatic humanism gives Foucault’s subjects the means to be active agents in the construction of their own meaning. Through an examination of The History of Sexuality (hereafter HS), volumes II and III (Foucault, 1986; 1988) as well as related essays and interviews, I establish the parameters for what I call here Foucault’s “pragmatic humanism” by looking at the parallel claims between pragmatism—emanating largely out of the work of John Dewey (1926; 1938; 1960; 1982; 1985; 1998)—and Foucault’s ethics. Foucault turned in the end, it is argued, to a pragmatic and non-cognitive (praxis-constituted) ethics to supplement the epistemological and power axes along which subjectivity was previously said to be formed. As a point of departure, then, this essay sets out to indicate where some of Foucault’s insights into how we might productively engage in practices of self-invention as positive forms of resistance take refuge in the language of an embodied, ethico-political and ultimately pragmatic humanism.

Toward the end of his life Foucault proclaimed—somewhat surprisingly—in the French newspaper Libération that there existed an “international citizenship that has its rights and its duties,” and which holds an obligation to speak out against governmental abuses of power (2000: 474). Now, what is so odd about this statement? After all, do we not embrace Foucault as the champion of “the undefined work of freedom” and resistance against the excesses of biopower and govern-

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Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue canadienne de science politique
37:4 (December/decembre 2004) 951–977
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mentality? Perhaps we do. But possibly we also need to take a sidelong glance at the notion of an “international citizenship with rights and duties” when invoking the name of Foucault. This is certainly not the Foucault who proclaimed, somewhat cryptically, that if fundamental arrangements in knowledge were to occur, modern man “would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea” (1970: 387). Neither is this the Foucault according to whom notions of anthropological humanism were suspect and who, in fact, spent the lion’s share of his academic career attempting to debunk. Nor can we say that this is the Foucault who decried all endeavours to formulate anything resembling a “theory of the subject.” Finally, this is not the Foucault who resonantly asserted the futility or non-value of the language of humanism, human rights and notions of justice in struggles against the excesses of government. In appropriating these themes, this earlier Foucault would say we can no longer think in terms of the rational progress of “humanity” in general. We can no longer succumb to the epistemological tyranny of the human sciences, with their fantastical and arbitrary insistence on the primacy of ideas as representations residing in a finite cogito, and thus, anthropocentric reflection.

However, this is the Foucault who rounded out, in the end, his own archaeological and genealogical investigations into what has made us subjects by supplying what might be called his own third critique, following a reconsideration of Kant and the Enlightenment. The relationship between knowledge and how we are formed as subjects in the world was always at the centre of Foucault’s project. In his archaeological investigations into the human sciences, for example, he assessed the extent to which Kant’s anthropological study of the limits of human knowledge came to bear on how we act morally or ethically in the world around us. The Foucault of Discipline and Punish (Foucault, 1979) and the HS, volume I (Foucault, 1980) posed a similar set of problems: How, through the “discourse of power,” are subjects constituted or, more precisely, why, in the name of “reason,” can the power of some be established over others (Foucault, 1991: 152)? In the work of the “final Foucault,” the emphasis shifts to how the individual constitutes—through morally significant actions—itself as a subject (“the subject qua subject”).

There is thus in these later works a sense in which Foucault’s notion of critique cannot altogether escape the spirit of Kant’s conception of “enlightenmentality,” one deemed by Kant as crucial for a politics of freedom. For Foucault, this quest must necessarily entail discarding previous injunctions against the Kantian imperative for an analysis of one’s being, a stress on the search for personal identity, some grounds for knowledge, truth, beauty and concomitant notions of human rights without, however, adopting the old adage that “universal man” is the final arbiter of truth, one buttressed by a transparent, all-knowing, transcendental ego. In order
Abstract. Michel Foucault’s late turn to ethics for an understanding of subject self-constitution is explored in relation to the problematic of humanism. Foucault’s reconsideration of Immanuel Kant’s Enlightenment-grounded legacy constitutes, it is argued, a significant resource for thinking about new ways to approach cultural practices that have as their aim a reconstitution of identity outside dominant structures of scientific and legal knowledge. This essay explores how Foucault’s earlier anti-humanist misgivings give way to a more ethical-pragmatic conception of humanism in relation to notions of freedom, rights and equality. The insights of pragmatism—particularly those of John Dewey—are employed as a means by which to situate what is called here the “pragmatic humanism” of the later Foucault.

Résumé. Le tour en retard de Michel Foucault à l’éthique pour une compréhension d’individu-constitution soumise est exploré par rapport au problématique de l’humanisme. La reconsidération de Foucault du legs d’Immanuel Kant publant hors de l’éclaireissement constitué, il est discuté, une ressource importante pour penser à de nouvelles manières d’approcher les pratiques culturelles qui ont en tant que leur but une reconstitution des structures dominantes d’extérieur d’identité de la connaissance scientifique et légale. Explore comment des craintes plus tôt d’anti-humaniste de Foucault mènent à une conception moral-pragmatique d’humanisme par rapport aux notions de la liberté, des droits, et de l’égalité. Les perspicacités du pragmatisme—en particulier ceux de John Dewey—utilisé comme moyens par lesquels pour situer ce qui est s’appellent ici l’humanisme pragmatique du Foucault plus défunt.

to arrive at this middle ground, Foucault must retain the possibility of critique; his critique of the limits of reason, like that of Kant, must resort to forms of self-legislation of what he wants to call a “critical ontology of the present.” Foucault still inveighs against the idea of a “human nature” as such; however, humanism is reconfigured as an Enlightenment-driven desire to realize both individual freedom and the freedom of others without buying into modernity’s dominant modes of ethical subjectification.

Pragmatism and Foucauldian Humanism

“Humanistic pragmatism” is a term most often associated with the work of the American pragmatist Richard Rorty. Yet, although certainly both he and Foucault share a rejection of foundationalist philosophy, ‘essentialist’ humanism, and subject-centred philosophy in general, Rorty’s ‘humanistic pragmatism’ is premised on the reinstatement of language and conversation as the keys to ‘privatizing’ philosophy. His point of departure rests on his desire to overcome the Platonic and Kantian traditions of employing language as a necessary step toward rational consensus. Rorty’s insistence on the primacy of language and conversation takes his humanistic pragmatism to the level of “social hope,” something he claims is lacking in Foucault, but is the cornerstone of Dewey’s philosophy (1982: 207–8; 1999: 238). Foucault, on the other hand, talks about “extra-discursive” ethical practice and by this he is not claiming that we constitute ourselves entirely outside of discourse, but that rather, as ethical subjects, we constitute ourselves through and around discourse, rather than in discourse, as Rorty would have it. For Dewey,
too, experience is extra-discursive in that we relate to nature, something that lies outside of language.

There is a sense in which many of the questions raised by Foucault’s critics have been addressed—if, in some cases, in a cursory manner—by the revival of a philosophical current which critically addresses the themes of postmodernism, deconstruction and antifoundationalism: that of pragmatism, with particular emphasis on the political writings of Dewey (Bernstein, 1992a; 1992b; Mouffe, 1996a; Stuhr, 1997; Shusterman; 1997; Festenstein, 1997; Good and Velody, 1998). Anxious to distance themselves from both “radical” postmodernism and strong foundationalism, some neopragmatists have begun to use the insights of classical pragmatism in an effort directed towards understanding “who we are” by engaging in a discourse which overcomes the despair, negativity and transgressive tendencies of earlier postmodernism and embraces what Richard Bernstein refers to as a more pragmatic orientation to ethico-political questions and notions of identity (Bernstein, 1992a: 838–40). Going “beyond objectivism and relativism” (Bernstein, 1983), this recent constellation of thought rejects fixed foundations when approaching questions of ethical and political value, but retains the demand for making “reasonable discriminations” (Bernstein, 1992a: 839). The return to classical pragmatism rests on an appreciation that such thinkers were ahead of their time in anticipating the plurality of values and the importance of extra-discursive experience while at the same time recognizing their own beliefs as historically conditioned, fallible and open to continual revision (Festenstein, 1997: 191).

Foucault still distances his views from the notion of humanism as a new vision of “man” and thus also rejects the notion of society as being conditioned by a transcendental unity of humanist forces, but this does not mean that we must see his views as a sterile renouncement of humanity or a call to nihilism (a similar argument has been made recently in relation to Jacques Derrida’s humanism (Peter, 2001)). Foucault’s genealogical analyses are designed to recapture, reconstruct and reinterpret past forms of human experience in order to better understand the present, hence his pragmatic understanding of subject self-constitution. His view of the social order as contingent, fragmented and ordered around the illusory aims of humanism does not mean that he assumes an anarchical position in relation to power and the social body. Rather, he presents us with a social order that is masked in a metaphysics of consciousness and subjugated knowledges; such an order is made up of various forms that are typically organized around austere and repetitive juridical and scientific rituals, and it is this reinscription of the juridical in non-juridical systems of knowledge to which he objects.

Foucault did not explicitly mention Dewey as a formative influence or even an intellectual bedfellow, perhaps because he did not want to
link his own postfoundationalist insights with the “naturalistic metaphysics” associated with Dewey. Like the American pragmatist Richard Rorty, Foucault sustains a humanism rooted in everyday experience, but one which leaves behind the metaphysical, foundationalist assumptions regarding an essential human nature. He objects, however, to Rorty’s criticism that what is lacking in his account is the notion of a “we” whose “consensus, whose values, whose traditions constitute the framework for a thought and define the conditions in which it can be validated” (1997: 114). Undoubtedly, Foucault would also object to Rorty’s valorization of an American, liberal “we” whose “values, consensus and traditions” are said by Rorty to constitute the ideal form of liberal democracy (Rorty, 1989; 1999). Neither does Foucault wish—as Rorty does—to displace universal truth, theory and reason by “privatizing philosophy” or, as one commentator has put it, by “telling stories for one’s own individual emancipation” (Shusterman, 2001: 141).

Foucault instead offers an ameliorative alternative to existing moral orders through his notion of “the care of the self” which sidesteps the individualist, ironic tone that informs Rorty’s pragmatism. In his reflections concerning what drives the “spirit” of enlightenment, Foucault does not refer to a “fixed” anthropocentric identity grounded in notions of utopian progress and bestowed with rights, but rather speaks of an ongoing process of self-invention, creativity and the will to transformation. Ethical self-creation is, as Foucault conceptualizes it, a new way of refusing to be what we are. It is a new way of practicing politics and attaining a certain degree of freedom. Such practices are progressive in that they suspend, overcome and supercede one-sided, negative forms of power. But, in his view, this movement of supercession is less a matter of devotion to the doctrinal dictates of transcendental humanism than it is an ethical stylization of political practices in their singularity. The genealogical axis along which we constitute ourselves as moral agents must lead to a working over of the substance of our ethics; it involves, above all, techniques of “self-forming activity” (Foucault, 1997: 262–5). Once we recognize the discursive and political limits that have been imposed on moral orders, we can start to think about ways by which to transform them by problematizing their extant, totalizing nature.

These same themes occupy much of John Dewey’s thinking, i.e., that the “aesthetic” can be reconciled with more traditional politico-ethical questions, ones that have both dialogical and pragmatic dimensions. The emergent self is the cornerstone of Dewey’s pragmatic anthropology; in his philosophical schema, there is no room for preconceived notions of the self, freedom or, indeed, reason. Such precepts become manifestations or results of particular types of interaction among people living in a world of uncertainty. They are, in Deweyan terms, the goods that are accorded us as a result of processes of deliberation, “social intelligence”
and choice (Boisvert, 1993: 145). Freedom for Dewey is the “power to act in accordance with choice. It is the actual ability to ... execute choices when they are made” (Dewey, 1998: 305).

Without digressing at length into the history of pragmatism, it is nonetheless important to note that the later Foucault’s desire to make life “a work of art” through “limit-testing,” “critique” and “ethical self-fashioning” dovetails with Dewey’s revisionary theory of “art as experience,” his insistence on the importance of transformative “self-realization,” and his emphasis on the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of life. Both want to free liberalism from the philosophical foundations of Enlightenment metaphysics; both advocate testing the limits of experience through “inquiry” or “critique”; both privilege individualism and freedom through self-creation; and, finally, both view the individual as a contingent product of history, never completed and thus lacking a human essence. While the differences in how each realizes this conception of the self are abundant, they nevertheless share a common pursuit of an understanding of contemporary life through a separation of non-discursive experience from ultimate foundations. Dewey argued for a “naturalistic humanism” to overcome the Enlightenment dualisms of metaphysics and epistemology, realism and idealism, mind and matter, etc. (Shusterman, 1997: 158). In a parallel manner, Foucault’s pragmatic ethics is the affirmation of a new type of freedom, one which leaves behind the Cartesian ego as the foundation of all knowledge and refurbishes human activity with a sense of embodiedness and emergent, non-discursive and practical creativity. A major connection that can be made between pragmatism and Foucault’s ethics, then, is a common refusal to abide by the rules of essentialist discourse. In the philosophical landscape of both thinkers, absolutism represents an undesirable limit to experience.1

One important point to be made is that, like Dewey, Foucault came increasingly to hold that activity—in his parlance, ethico-political practice—must be conceived of as the cornerstone of experience and that this activity encompasses both theoretical knowledge (intellectual action) and an embodied sense of living in the corporeal world (somatic action). In the latter phase of Dewey’s career, active experience was for him a matter of finding meaningful, purposeful experience based on practical and intellectual beliefs. “Man,” he says,

has ... beliefs about the actual structure and processes of things; and he also has beliefs about the values which should regulate his conduct. The question of how these two ways of believing may most effectively and fruitfully interact with one another is the most general and significant of all the problems which life presents to us. (Dewey, 1960 [1929]: 18–19)

In Dewey’s view, the act of knowing has been caught up in the “quest for certainty” since the time of the ancient Greeks. But such quests have
remained traditionally within a priori frameworks without regard for how the play of ideas itself is a hypothetical, experimental endeavour in which action may be located as the fulcrum around which human experience, indeed knowledge itself, revolves (Dewey, 1960: 166–8). We seek freedom, he says, in “something which comes to be, in a certain kind of growth; in consequences, rather than in antecedents” (Dewey, 1998: 311).

Foucault, too, starts from the assumption that human beings are not Kant’s detached “rational beings” or “autonomous agents” who seek emancipation from corporeal constraints and overcome those constraints through self-legislation and self-sufficiency. Kant’s anthropological humanism depended on the “autonomy of the will” for the realization of universal moral law. He dismissed the significance of particular, embodied beings for the realization of autonomy, arguing instead for the presocial, ahistorical being who predates all individual forms of existence. Foucauldian ethics, on the other hand, seeks to situate individuals within an ontology of lived experience. His turn to aesthetics, ethics and the importance of Kant’s fourth question, “What is man?” was a move that enabled him to demonstrate the possibility of a meaningful, creative and sensuous world, a move that is similar in aim to Dewey’s pragmatic theory of aesthetics (Joas, 1993: 84).²

There is to be found in Foucault’s later work parallel arguments regarding how we, as active agents, engage in practical activity. Foucault speaks in this later phase of a “limit-experience.” By this he means the attitude that we must take with regard to practical political systems. Such an attitude must be, Foucault says, thoroughly historical, experimental and critical (1997: 316). The “limit-experience” that he urges us to engage in applies equally to the search for truth through continuous inquiry into the forces that have constituted us as subjects so that one day, we will look back and see the arbitrariness of scientific and humanist conceptions of “truth.” In a similar manner, Dewey’s opposition to fixed, scientific and universal standards of truth rested on his conviction that ethics should treat theory not as a fixed recipe, but as tools of criticism (Pappas, 1998: 106). As we will see, the notion of “critique” in Foucault’s ethics functions in much the same manner.

The pressing realities for Dewey reside not in absolute idealism or reductive materialism (the stuff of traditional metaphysics) but in the contingencies of thought and action. The “slippery idea of experience,” Dewey tell us, has resulted in a misconceived union between the transcendentalist, who “has conspired with his arch-enemy, the sensualist, to narrow the acknowledged subject matter of experience and to lessen its potencies for a wider and directed reflective choice” (1926: 38–9). Moreover, for him, aesthetic experience is the most meaningful form of experience, and this obtains in political matters as well as other fields of experience (Fott, 1998).
The following section addresses the possible parallels between Foucault and Dewey which may help to point to an understanding of Foucault’s reconsideration of the problematic of humanism.

**Criticism and Critique**

It might be rightly asked: What makes Foucault’s ethics pragmatic and, more specifically, Deweyan pragmatic? First, a general claim. Although Foucault does not refer to the philosophical current of pragmatism, the affinities between his attempt to ground knowledge in historically contingent practices—albeit in its general forms—and Dewey’s concern to overcome transcendentental philosophy provide convincing evidence that Foucault made a turn toward pragmatism, though he did not in any systematic way apply it to his own genealogies of power and the ethical self-construction of the subject. At the same time, significant points of departure can be found between Foucault and Deweyan pragmatism. For instance, Dewey’s “instrumentalism” was one avenue in the process of inquiry that was designed to show how logic had an empirical subject matter—in other words, to show that thought had an instrumental function in establishing the consequences of actions. Instrumentalism is thus a theory of the general forms of conception and reasoning that can be applied to everyday actions and their consequences (Thayer, 1981: 168–9). Nothing could be farther from Foucault’s later views on the Enlightenment and ethics than the establishment of a theory of logic. But it would be inaccurate, if not unfair, to characterize Dewey’s pragmatism as a work of logic. His overall project was to determine the relations between knowledge and practice, and he took many routes aside from logic (notably, ethics and social psychology) in his attempt to formulate answers to questions of subjectivity. But because they take different routes to reach an understanding of the relations of knowledge and practice does not mean that the projects of Foucault and Dewey must be seen as mutually exclusive.

In the second instance, Foucault, like Dewey, sees philosophy’s role as one of criticism, not of confirming eternal truths. Moreover, as a form of criticism, philosophy’s most vital function is to transform the existing cultural and social order. For Dewey, a culturally transformative philosophy is something we all engage in; as Michael Eldridge points out, Dewey regards it as an instrument by which we can refine and redefine our beliefs, habits and institutions (1998: 36). In Dewey’s view, this is the work of intelligent action; such action is not only indispensable for satisfying transformation, but also constitutes one of the possibilities of experience itself. It is, says Dewey, “in constant process of forming, and its retention requires constant alertness in observing consequences, an
open-minded will to learn and courage in re-adjustment” (1921: 96–7). Insofar as its ethical dimensions are concerned, intelligence (or criticism) is the key to realizing our potential; it is both embodied and creative, carving out ways by which to reflect morally on problematic life-situations. Above all, criticism involves deliberation, but this deliberation must be experientially grounded and such a method applies equally to moral valuation (Fesmire, 1999: 140). The role of criticism cannot be overstated in Dewey’s pragmatic conception of experience; our roles as cultural critics stem, moreover, from our somatic, experiential states, from our existence as biological organisms interacting in our environments and attempting to make them more habitable. Indeed, for Dewey, criticism is the very kernel of free social inquiry in a democracy. Political practice needs an intellectual transfusion by way of processes which would render more comprehensible the conditions and consequences of situations. Such transformations hold out the possibilities for individual growth and development (Eldridge, 1998: 87).

Foucault’s views on the role of critique have analogical import here. In his essay “What is Enlightenment?” he takes the spirit of Kant’s emphasis on the importance of critique and redefines it as something to be permanently exercised in relation to our contingent existences as self-transforming individuals. Criticism, Foucault says,

is no longer going to be practiced in the search for formal structures with universal value, but, rather, as a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are thinking, doing, saying. This historico-critical attitude must also be an experimental one. [It must] open up a realm of historical inquiry, and ... put itself to the test of reality, of contemporary reality, both to grasp the points where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take. (1997: 316)

For Foucault, critique is the instrument by which we can discover the limits that need to be crossed over. Ideally, for him, criticism would take on a “positive” form; it might consist, he suggests, of “scintillating leaps of the imagination” and “bear the lightning of possible storms” (Foucault, 1997: 323). For Foucault, then, critique is “philosophy in activity.” His strategy in identifying critique as a much-needed response to societal problems falls back on the notion that there are possibilities beyond traditional, sovereign philosophy to be explored. The aim of critique is thus to function as philosophical resolutions to those problems that can no longer be resolved through traditional means. The critic thus 1) traces through genealogy the contingencies that have made subjects what they are (conditions and consequences); and 2) through doing so, opens up the possibilities to new and experimental forms of subjectivity.
Much of this line of argument is enmeshed in, if not inseparable from, the Kantian distinction between public and private reason. Foucault urges us to read carefully Kant’s text on the Enlightenment to better grasp the importance that Kant placed on public, procedural reason in contemporary reality (as opposed to viewing history as a teleological process). Private reason is that which we use as “public servants” or in our duties to religion, the state and so on. Public reason, on the other hand, is that which is the guarantor of our freedom. Humanity must put its own reason to use, outside of any existing authority, and it is precisely at this point that critique is necessary (Foucault, 1997: 307–8). The divergence between Foucault and Rorty is arguably most pronounced here, for it is at this point that Rorty reverses both Kant’s and Foucault’s definition of private and public reason. In Rorty’s (much contested) account, private reason is the domain through which we pursue self-creation and autonomy; public reason, then, is the domain in which it is possible to avoid “cruelty” and achieve social justice. However, Rorty believes that an inseparable gulf divides the two domains of reason; self-fulfillment and autonomy cannot be reconciled with issues of social justice. He also makes the somewhat curious claim that there is no possible way to reconcile the two principal historicist views of truth as something that is both contingent and discovered. He goes on to make the distinction between, on the one hand, Foucault and Heidegger (where individual self-creation and autonomy are paramount) and on the other hand between Dewey and Habermas (where the desire for community is paramount) (Rorty, 1989: xiv). The private “liberal ironist” is one who can, at best, discriminate between the two forms of reason, and it is Rorty’s hope that such a liberalism can lead to a more universalistic or globalized form wherein our human solidarity resides in common ethico-political, liberal sensibilities. Very little of Rorty’s account of liberal ironism as the key to human solidarity connects with Foucault’s own ethico-political sensibilities. As Chantal Mouffe points out, Rorty’s assertion that the public and the private realms of reason cannot be reconciled deprives us of some of the rich critical analysis that public ironists, such as Nietzsche and Foucault, can offer (1996b: 3).

Foucault’s understanding of the role of critique is more similar to Dewey’s unyielding emphasis on criticism, or what Dewey calls “intelligence.” In Reconstruction in Philosophy, Dewey offers four methodological strategies: a detailed observation of the situation; an analysis of its diverse factors; an inquiry into the anticipated versus actual consequences; and a reconstruction of the subjects’ lives and experiences (1921: 163–4). Insofar as both thinkers are concerned, the act of critique or of criticism is both historical and experimental, but also intended as a possible crossing over to new, reconstructed forms of subjectivity in which private
reason (autonomy and self-creation) and public reason (socialization in a community) might exist alongside each other, albeit in contingent, historical forms.\textsuperscript{3}

The pragmatic rejection of fixed and directly applicable criteria rests on a rejection of absolutes, or the fixed rationality that lies beneath the criterial view of morality because it places primacy on practice rather than on epistemological foundations. And criteria, even if they are applied after deliberation, are subject to revision in accordance with changing behaviours in changing circumstances. Pragmatic criteria, according to Dewey, are minimalistic heuristic tools we use in making informed judgments; pragmatism does not decide in advance what is “good” or what is “bad,” but takes into account a process of continuous formation. Foucault claims that the subject is not a “substance” but a form that is shaped in different ways, depending on differential historical experiences (Foucault, 1997: 290–1). As with Foucault, the self in Dewey’s ethics is not a “substance” but a form, or an organization of habits that are relatively enduring but subject to change (Pappas, 1998: 110–11). Simply because Foucault does not employ the criteria of good virtue or duty as a source of moral justification for resistance does not mean that his analyses are without some normative content, even though he does not have an ethical theory per se. Foucault’s pragmatism is premised on a union of theoretical (thought) and empirical (everyday practices) concerns as two interrelated elements of ethics and, as such, neither demands nor articulates a universal Kantian moral theory.

**Inquiry and Problematization**

Another way to link Foucault with Dewey is to establish a connection between Dewey’s “pattern of inquiry” and Foucault’s notion of “problematization.” The first stage in Dewey’s pattern of inquiry is to set up a problem in order to determine its “warranted assertability.” “Warranted” denotes an outcome that is based on the experience of some past action(s), while “assertability” is forward looking; together, they make up something potentially applicable as a guideline for how to act. Dewey does not deny that knowledge issues in some form of action, but wants to inquire about the consequences of those actions. Is it not true, he asks, that “knowledge is instituted and framed in anticipation of the consequent issue?” (1982: 278) Dewey insists that the only true object of knowledge is completed action. Knowledge is a process of activities which takes into account the problematic nature of present acts, focuses on the successful aspects of those acts, and creates a new, non-transcendental guide for the present (Shook, 2000: 178). Earlier, we saw that for Foucault, both theoretical knowledge and
practical activity were essential for ethical conduct. Foucault says that thought

is not what inhabits a certain conduct and gives it meaning; rather, it is what allows one to step back from this way of acting or reacting, to present it to oneself as an object of thought and to question it as to its meaning, its conditions, and its goals. Thought is freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem. (Foucault, 1997: 117)

Inquiry as understood by Dewey and problematization as understood by Foucault are tools which are not given to us a priori, but rather they allow for reflective activity, though the particular avenues through which these forms of activity are said to accrue differ. One of the central postulates of pragmatism is a stress on the relation of theory to praxis, taking the continuity of experience as revealed through the outcome of directed action as the starting point for reflection. In Dewey’s view, inquiry is the only means by which we can transform our immediate experiences into objects of knowledge, including knowledge of oneself. Inquiry, in other words, produces knowledge about the past (including the immediate past) so that we may make intelligible choices for the future. It is, says Dewey, the work of moral intelligence (1921: 164).

Similarly, “problematization” is what Foucault calls his approach to understanding the totality of past discursive and non-discursive practices whose starting point is the present situation. It is crucial to understand that, for Foucault, our ontological states are formulated through problematizations and practices; they are not handed over to us a priori. Only we, as embodied, thinking beings who act, can make ourselves what we are. In other words, we be-come through everyday practices, employing a pragmatic approach to what it means to be human in all of our ethical and political dimensions. Insofar as Western practical systems are concerned, there have existed general patterns of regularities which are, however, historically singular in nature. These regularities include the bifurcation of reason (constitution of the subject as both subject and object) and what Foucault had earlier called “dividing practices” that are common to all practical systems.

The vital aspect of problematization is that it does not purport to arrive at a “valid” solution to political problems; rather, problematization is “the development of a domain of acts, practices, and thoughts that ... pose problems for politics” (Foucault, 1997: 114). Its role, in other words, is to question politics. It is the only way by which to become a “we.” We must ask: Why does politics assume the reasons it does for this or that action? Why does it assume one position as opposed to another? Problematization helps us to understand the history of thought; in fact, Foucault says, it is “a work of thought” itself (1997: 119). How do we
pragmatize current political practices so as to fashion ourselves as ethical, active subjects? We must define the objects, rules of action, and modes of relation to ourselves if we are to analyze questions of general import (Foucault, 1997: 318). Problematization is a way of using history to account for the present. It is a strategy that moves back and forth between presentist and historicist perspectives. Finally, it is a way to determine a problem, define its domain of objects, and traverse those objects in order to solve the problem.

Seen from the above perspectives, Dewey’s concept of inquiry and Foucault’s strategy of problematization serve as modes of analysis by which we can understand the conditions and consequences under which both forms of subjectivity and particular actions occurred. Both concepts require intelligence or thoughtfulness and play a potentially transformative role in our lived (and differential) experiences. This does not discount the importance of bringing some sense of order into our plurality of contingencies, but the key importance of both inquiry or problematization lies in the identification of new pathways to actual, ethical experience as individuals who actively construct and reconstruct their existences.

This paper has suggested the possibility that Foucault’s later project increasingly aims to de-anthropologize humanism through a pragmatic reconstruction of forms of subject-experience. The humanism that emerged in the nineteenth century, he believed, is an impossible project, a foundational anthropologism that governs “from above.” Thus, conceived in a pragmatic fashion—one which recognizes as well as problematizes the various practices of subject formation—humanism is not discarded but rather reformulated and revitalized by giving up its transcendental form through the genealogical reconstruction of experience. According to Foucault, “Experience is understood as the correlation between fields of knowledge, types of normativity, and forms of subjectivity in a particular culture” (1986: 4). He opted, he says, for a “hermeneutics of the self” as a methodological strategy to understand the moral and ethical dimensions of sexual behaviour. What were the “games of truth,” he asks, by which humans came to see themselves as desiring subjects? Why this ethical concern, this moral solicitude, with sexual conduct (Foucault, 1986: 6–10)?

We cannot, says Foucault, simply break our “repressive deadlocks,” believing that we will be reconciled with ourselves and rediscover our true natures (1997: 282). In other words, when we speak of freedom, we must conceive of it as an ongoing set of ethical practices in which experience and practice are indispensable to one another. This ethical freedom, moreover, must be problematized; it is something to be progressively worked on which is at the same time a way of limiting and controlling power (Foucault, 1997: 288). Foucault now conceptualizes
the subject as possessing the potential for autonomy in practices of self-mastery, which means, among other things, acquiring knowledge about oneself. He charts the care for the self as originating in the Greek precept epimeleia heautou, a term meaning not only the attainment of knowledge of oneself through thought, but through everyday practices: “it describes a work, an activity; it implies attention, knowledge, technique” (Foucault, 1997: 269). The connection to the late modern era rests on Foucault’s hope for subjects who are no longer passive dupes in the humanist regimes of power and knowledge, but are attributed a degree of creativity within such regimes. This is a crucial change, for it admits of an ontology that he was previously unwilling to grant in his analyses of modern culture. Politics does not have to be grounded in liberal or humanist notions of emancipation. Politics is something to be agonally practiced; it is not a game in which the stakes between competing factions represent abstract or ungrounded forms of freedom. Thus conceived, freedom itself is not inherent in the old, humanist order of things, but rather it is to be found, as far as possible, in ongoing agonistic, ethico-political practice. The next section addresses what many of Foucault’s later critics have labelled an egocentric form of ethical self-creation.

Freedom, Social Ethics and Games of Truth

A number of Foucault’s critics have labelled his later work a form of “dandyism,” “self-centred ethics” and “aesthetic self-indulgence.” They claim that his concern with practices of the self and self-creation are not consonant with the notion of community, and thus exclude the political (Hiley, 1985: 78–80; Simons, 1995: 102). For his part, Dewey’s views on community have been well rehearsed. While primarily a champion of individual self-realization, he nonetheless believed that the self was first and foremost a product of social life. Dewey’s care for the self was expressed completely in care for the community (Shusterman, 1997: 54; Campbell, 1998); he refused to consider the self-creating subject except in relation to society (Foot, 1998: 33; Eldridge, 1998). What is at issue is the ways in which Foucault’s ethics are often misread as a passing instance of narcissism, whereby self-creation and autonomy are said to be carried out in isolation from others, thus lacking an intersubjective element. This Nietzschean “war of all against all” type of stance is often (mis)conceptualized as Foucault establishing ontological precedence over anything resembling a relationship to others in a community.

One such argument goes as follows: Foucault’s study of ancient Greek practices and the arts of the self leads to the conclusion that ethical self-
“Pragmatic Humanism” in Foucault’s Later Work

stylistization precluded any relationship between individual and community. “It makes no difference,” the argument goes, “whether [Foucault] is considering Classical Greek, Hellenistic and Roman, Christian or Modern practices,” the focus on “selfish-creation” remains unmoved (Garrison, 1998:125). Unhappily, such arguments gloss Foucault’s claims about the care of the self as emanating solely from his studies on Greco-Roman antiquity. As classical historian Arnold Davidson notes, Foucault’s history of ethics has been widely misinterpreted. His studies on ethical behaviour in ancient times, Davidson further argues, do not depend on a modern understanding of subjectivity; their historical import derives from “writing a history of the self”; the ancient theme of self-knowledge was regularly associated with the care of the self. Davidson further argues that critics are misinterpreting Foucault’s care of the self as a “psychologization” that “shrinks the world to the size of oneself” (Davidson, 1994: 76–80).

Foucault’s views on the ethical self-creation of the late modern subject are indeed another matter. It is true that in his analysis of Baudelaire’s modernism, he emphasizes the relationship that an individual has to oneself as one of “ironic heroization of the present” in which the “aesthetic elaboration of the self” has no place either in society or the body public (Foucault, 1997). But is Foucault himself urging such an attitude for late modern subjects, or is it rather that he is not so much undertaking a history of individuality here as he is attempting to reconstruct the experience of the subject, conceptions which cannot be so easily subsumed under the opposed rubrics of “individual” and “collective” (Miller, 1999: 188–9)? What Foucault seems to be getting at here is not that personal ethics in our own age should be completely separated from the rest of culture; he is not, for instance, precluding the possibility that transgressive action translates into transgressive political action, as has been suggested (Garrison, 1998: 132). In his leap from Baudelaire’s modernism to his discussions of what attitudes we late moderns might develop in relation to the care of the self, one must read carefully the many essays and interviews he wrote and conducted in the months before his death. A more careful reading reveals that the potential for resistance comes not from an individualistic bid for self-mastery and freedom alone, nor merely from existing collective practices of liberation, but rather together the elements constitute the transgressive or emancipatory potential of modern subjects:

I am not trying to say that liberation as such . . . does not exist. When a colonized people attempts to liberate itself from its colonizers, this is indeed a practice of liberation in the strict sense. But we know very well . . . that this practice of liberation is not in itself sufficient to define the practices of freedom that will still be needed if this people, this society, and these individuals
are to be able to define admissible and acceptable forms of existence or political society. The analyses I am trying to make bear essentially on relations of power. (Foucault, 1997: 282–3)

Central to Foucault’s view that we possess the potential for our own self-creation is the notion of what he calls “games of truth.” He wants to abandon rigid and closed boundaries and speak of human freedom as something that we late moderns practice agonistically; that is, within the context of a multiplicity of identities, identities through which we create our own freedom in our everyday practices. These games of truth, Foucault clarifies, are not merely concealed power relations, but have a bearing on specific power relations. What are the sets of rules by which truth is produced? How can we develop the ethos, the morality and other practices of the self so as to play these games of truth with as little domination as possible (Foucault, 1997: 298)? Our present task, according to Foucault, lies in the construction of our own meaning through agonistic political struggle for “respect of rights, of critical thought against abusive techniques of government and research in ethics that seeks to ground individual freedom” (1997: 299). And, for Foucault, these forms of struggle are concretely grounded in a multiplicity of everyday practices; they hinge precisely on the ethical relationship of the self to the self and to others. The governmentality that Foucault spoke of in his earlier analyses of power was one in which subjects were epiphenomenally molded from without, i.e., by epistemological-political technologies of government (psychiatry, penal institutions, etc.). In his later work on ethics, there is a more explicit theorization of the “interiority” of subjects (Dean, 1994: 201). Above all, Foucault’s ethical subjects are not given, but instead form themselves as ongoing works of freedom in the public political arena. As James Tully has noted, Foucault’s focus on the game-like intersubjective activity of polities itself as the practice of freedom had been prefigured in the work of Hannah Arendt who, like Foucault, believed that freedom demands that we abandon the rules and theories of politics, indeed the concept of sovereignty itself, and turn instead toward the activity or game of politics in its everyday concreteness (Tully, 1999).

Insofar as Dewey is concerned, the practice of freedom and democracy cannot be reduced to the false dualism of “individual” versus “social.” Individuals, he says, cannot be divorced from their social surroundings or the fact that their actions have consequences for society: “They may think they are clamoring for purely personal liberty, but what they are doing is to bring into being a greater liberty to share in other associations, so that more of their individual potentialities will be released and their personal experience enriched (1985: 194). Similarly, in a later interview conducted in Toronto in 1982 titled “Sex, Power,
and the Politics of Identity,” Foucault makes it clear that the possibilities for resistance and emancipation are not just a matter of the ethical self-stylization of the individual, but that such practices might at times be conceived in terms of collective power relations in the form of identity politics, which is one of the possible ways by which we can change existing power relationships. It is a “creative process; to create and recreate, to change the situation, actually to be an active member of that process” (1997: 166–8). What has happened since the 1960s is that there has been a decolonization of power due to the political innovation and political experimentation of social movements (Foucault, 1997: 172–3). Foucault’s active subject cannot, as he makes clear, be divorced from its own society; the practices of self-invention are models to be found in its culture, proposed and suggested by its social group (Foucault, 1997: 291). In another reversal of posture, he cites with approval the liberation movements of the 1970s, adding that we need to go even further:

I think that one of the factors of this stabilization will be the creation of new forms of life, relationships, friendships in society, art, culture, and so on through our sexual, ethical, and political choices. Not only do we have to defend ourselves, not only affirm ourselves, as an identity but as a creative force. (Foucault, 1997: 164)

There is, then, a rejection here of a strictly legal conception of the subject, arguing instead for an ethical subject who is constituted through agonal practices of self-invention and in interaction with others. An agonal form of politics is a positive, self-creating medium. Agonism is a form of contestation that is intended to give fuller expression to differences in public life. It works towards exposing the essentialist character of identities by challenging existing distributions of power and encouraging contingent forms of identity and self-creation (see Connolly, 1991; Honig, 1993b; Honig, 1993a). Foucault’s later work on the self as a work of art is indebted to Nietzsche’s view that struggle is essential for an aesthetic life of continual self-overcoming (Thiele, 1990: 916). Foucault maintains, along with Nietzsche, that only an agonal form of subjectivity—as “permanent provocation”—can work to counter the entrenched ideals of humanism and the insidious forms of power that have issued out of such a doctrine. Politics does not have to be grounded in traditional liberal and humanist notions of emancipation. In Foucault’s pragmatic conception, liberty is never absolute; it is something that must be exercised: “I think that it can never be inherent in the structure of things to guarantee the exercise of freedom. The guarantee of freedom is freedom” (Foucault, 2000: 354–5). So, freedom itself is not inherent in the humanist order of things, but rather is to be found, as
far as possible, in agonistic, ethico-political practice. Practices of liberation may lead to freedom, but it is the practice of freedom itself, as “the ontological condition of ethics,” that constitutes the core of our ethical identities (Foucault, 1997: 284).

Arguably, this agonistic form of subjectivity is a second-order ontological claim about what it is like to be in a particular socio-political world, and this supplies Foucault with a purpose for resistance which leads, in turn, to new forms of social ethics and self-creativity. One can defend human rights, but first one has to contest the ground upon which humanism defends such rights. It is a matter of redefining the battle lines, as it were; rather than relying on antiquarian doctrines of being, we must engage in the act of becoming and create the social and ethico-political conditions under which individuals have the right to change the direction of those very conditions. That is where our dignity as human beings resides. The point is to free oneself from such power relations by acting ethically, by respecting oneself and acting in concert with others so as to maximize freedom. Why should we tolerate present conditions and limits? Can we not invent new “games of truth” outside of those imposed on us by the various episodes of anthropological humanism? How, finally, can the growth of our capacities be separated from the intensification of power relations? These questions are, for Foucault, the crucial questions regarding the state of enlightenment. Such questions are directed at the heart of philosophy; thought itself should be experimental rather than secure, transgression rather than representational, and ethical rather than juridical. As Thomas Osborne notes, it is a mistake to see Foucault as a “knee-jerk” anti-humanist; rather, he is pointing out that, because humanism is given to us as an obligation, it is asking for the perspective of the critique of enlightenment to be brought against it (Osborne, 1998: 135). It is the argument of this paper that, for Foucault, this dilemma presented an ethical problem. It poses an aesthetic responsibility, if one likes, one that Foucault saw as a defining feature of enlightenment. And to act ethically is not to act according to a set of regulative rules and principles that we are all subject to; it is more a question of the constitutive role of ethics. It is Foucault’s view, then, that only when practices of individual freedom and collective liberation make themselves apparent can there be an opening up of the possibilities to pave the way for transgression of the various forms of humanist political rationality. Freedom “requires a certain degree of liberation”; it is not something that can be ethically self-attained until the processes of liberation “[pave] the way for new power relationships, which must be controlled by practices of freedom” (Foucault, 1997: 283–4).

When Foucault says that the ethics of the concern for the self are in themselves practices of freedom, he is not saying, as is com-
monly assumed, that there are no openings for resistance against power. Freedom is not simply a matter of self-aestheticization; but where there are power relations, i.e., between two or more individuals, there is the freedom to resist. It must be remembered at this point that Foucault is not interested in establishing a universal solution to the problem of freedom. He is more concerned with introducing a sense of struggle for freedom that arises out of the interactions one has with others, in particular from socio-political configurations. While it is true that he refuses to lay out a programmatic framework for praxis, he nonetheless points to the dangers of present-day subjectification and cautions that one must struggle “as other,” as an individual or as part of a collective whose self-constitution is at stake (Thiele, 1990: 919–20).

Foucault’s answer to the “why fight at all” question is found in the valourization of struggle itself (Rajchman, 1985; Connolly, 1991). The purpose of our practices of freedom is to legitimate struggle through a perpetual challenge to the humanist ethico-political order. We should not have to accept the limits of our own subjectivity, limits that have been imposed on us by humanist regimes which mask their intentions as so many humanitarian measures designed to further the progress of “man”; we must “refuse who we are” by engaging in what Simons conceives of as an “ethic of permanent resistance” (Simons, 1995: 87). But this ethic is neither universal nor necessary; it does not hold true for all notions of being in every linguistic context. Rather, it is meaningful only in the context of modernity. And, struggle, as Foucault conceives of it, is not always a negative construct. In other words, we need to struggle for the ethico-political conditions under which self-invention is possible. It means that there are always possibilities for changing the situation (Foucault, 1997: 166). Foucault does not ask “Why be ethical?”, since to pose such a question would be to emphasize the processes of freedom over the practices of freedom, would take him beyond the effective reach of ethical concern. Instead, he investigates the different ways by which individuals cultivate care for ethical identity (Connolly, 1991: 10). In the following two sections, I look more closely at the parallels between Foucault and Dewey and what they might mean for an understanding of Foucault’s pragmatic humanism.

**Practicing Politics as Pragmatic Humanism**

Understood in a broad way, being human means, for Foucault, having the capacity to be liberated and improved upon. It is this growth of capacity that informs his later writing on ethics. What is at stake is our very existence as meaningful beings living in a world, in a culture that should not be considered, as it was in *Discipline and Punish*, a prison from which we cannot escape. We need to fashion ourselves as ethical creatures faced
with unfamiliarity and the contingency of history. Foucault makes this an active imperative, a social and political obligation on the part of humans; it is something that humans owe to themselves. In short, his genealogy of ethics is not simply confined to a critique of humanist political rationality, but suggests an opening for new ways for both individual and collective self-creation; it is a questioning of the terms of democracy and addresses how we can better fashion ourselves within existing political configurations. We are only “free” when we can identify—through the pragmatic reconstruction of experience—the limits that shackle our subjectivity. Formalist anthropology is premised on the idea that, as humans, we possess an inner nature that must be brought to light in the face of alienation and other social and political constraints. In this sense, Foucault’s anti-humanism is a strict rejection of anthropologism (hence the importance of his rejection of Marxism). But his own brand of anthropology starts from the assumption that human beings are both particular and practical and that “truth” is not something that is external to our experience, but rather something that can always be concretely achieved in the light of our experience.

Foucault, then, does not believe that the only useful point of resistance to political power is in the relationship of the self to the self. For instance, when he speaks in these later works of “governmentality,” he is defending the claim that such a notion implies a relationship of the self to the self, but he is also making the point that governmentality also covers a whole range of practices that constitute, define, organize and instrumentalize the strategies that individuals in their freedom can use in dealing with each other. Thus, the basis for all these practices is freedom, the relationship of the self to itself and the relationship to the other (Foucault, 1997: 300).

These “games of truth” do not, however, exist outside power relations. Foucault is not claiming that there exist states of communication that would allow such games of truth to circulate freely without constraint. And, as Simons points out, Foucault’s desire to “unhinge” the analytical link between ethics and other social or economic structures needs to be “carefully qualified” since, in spite of his attempt to conceive of the care of the self apart from juridical and scientific constraints, transgressive aestheticism is deeply embedded in political processes which involve constraints (Simons, 1995: 80). Ethico-political practices and the transgressive arts of the self are pedagogically exigent; such practices are a matter of teaching new skills and transmitting knowledge to minimize state domination. They belong to the arena of “political struggle and respect for rights, of critical thought against abusive techniques of government and research in ethics” (Foucault, 1997: 299). In Foucault’s view, that is the ground of freedom. In addition to this, there is a change in Foucault’s stance toward partial and local inquiries into the status of “truth.” Once a
champion of “radical” or subjugated knowledges, he now conceives both global and partial projects to be potentially dangerous. This caution can be linked to his views that a) Western science needs a more thorough internal critique of itself in order to unhinge the link between (dominating) science and ethical practice; and b) local, subjugated knowledges also need such internal critiques so as not to fall prey to “dangerous traditions,” conceived of as non-reflexive and potentially destructive instances of alterity (Foucault, 1997: 316).

Foucault’s ethics are not a *tabula rasa* upon which to inscribe current practices of freedom. Certainly, his harking back to philological texts to discover how ethics were problematized does not seem to have much meaning for current forms of subjectivity. Foucault’s own response to this charge rests on his view that the similarities that exist between our present and the ancient past are instanced in how ethical sensibilities, then and now, constitute a deeper, more practical concern than religious or legal problems. But just because he laments the lack of a non-scientific foundation for ethical behaviour and agonic practice does not mean that such an ethical project should be abandoned; what such movements need to be infused with, he says, is a “hyper and pessimistic activism” which would work towards supplying such a foundation. In a broad sense, then, Foucault’s critique of Western science must thus be seen as a critique from within the tradition of Enlightenment rationality.

**Foucault’s Declaration of Human Rights**

It was mentioned earlier that Foucault’s nominalism underwent some modification with his later “declaration of human rights.” The occasion for this statement, “Confronting Governments: Human Rights” was the announcement in Geneva concerning the creation of an International Committee against Piracy. To think of Foucault as a champion of human rights seems fraught with contradiction, if not downright perverse, but in itself, this statement indicates just how far Foucault had circled back to Enlightenment themes. There exists today, he says, an “international citizenship that has its rights and duties,” who are “members of the community of the governed and [who] are thereby *obliged to show mutual solidarity*” by speaking out against abuses of governmental power. In response to governments that “arrogate themselves the right to pass off as profit or loss the human unhappiness that their decisions provoke ... it is the duty of this international citizenship” to bring light to bear on the unjustness of this *collective suffering*, grounding “*an absolute right* to stand up and speak to those who hold power” (emphasis added). The shift from a will to power to a will to transgression is evident in his final statement that “the will of individuals must make a place for itself
in a reality of which governments have attempted to reserve a monopoly for themselves” (Foucault, 2000: 474–5).

What is to be made of Foucault’s shift from radically nominalist conceptions of subjectivity to categories of meaning, duty and, above all, human rights? Or, to put it differently, how does Foucault’s late appeal to a normative ground sit within a philosophy of the subject? In the first place, whereas his investigations into modern practices of power rest on a reductive principle that conceives of subjectivity as fully constituted and structured by ubiquitous power relations, his call for the internationalization of rights based on subject solidarity introduces a hermeneutic element into his analysis by acknowledging that subjects are endowed with self-reflexive, self-determined capacities that allow for an understanding of the abrogation of individual, as well as collective, moral rights. That is not to say that such an understanding is transcendental-collective in the Kantian sense. It is to suggest, however, that the quasi-universalism that creeps into Foucault’s later writings rests on a thematic which has as its guiding assumption the notion of humanity as being commonly governed and possessing mutual understandings regarding inherent rights and obligations as weapons with which to fight governmental abuse. Moreover, such understandings are constructed and this, Foucault points out, was what lay at the heart of Kant’s ethics (Foucault, 1997: 279–80). At a minimum, by introducing the notion of a self-understood and self-constructed “international citizenship,” Foucault has led his critical theory into the backyard of a hermeneutic theory of subjectivity. In the second instance, such a call belies Rorty’s insistence that Foucault’s philosophy cannot bridge the gulf between private and public reason, in spite of Rorty’s (contradictory) later claim that Foucault “thinks in terms of something deep within human beings, which is deformed by acculturation” (1989: 64).

Foucault’s overall defense of human rights is precisely that; human rights are defensible, but the grounds upon which they may be defended must be established through the construction and creation of the conditions under which agonal individuals and groups can contest and change those conditions which hamper self-creativity, non-essentialist forms of embodied identity, and struggle itself. For him, then, “human” rights need to be historiologically and pragmatically determined; they arise out of revolutions, social movements and other social constructions in which individuals and groups make demands on governments.

Concluding Remarks

This essay claims that Foucault’s later thinking on ethics, subjectivity and truth cannot be fully understood on the basis of reading HS, Volumes II and III alone, in which self-aestheticization-as-ethics bears largely on the
relationship one has to oneself. His own political activism, his interviews and essays, including his statement on human rights, indicate that he was not advocating a form of dandyism as a style of existence, but rather became increasingly sympathetic towards the efficacy of social movements and the need for collective rights as a form of resistance against domination. Second, the argument has attempted to reveal how Foucault’s appropriation of Kant’s notion of critique assumes the sense of enabling, positive practices in which the freedom of the present might secure its autonomy. At the same time, Foucault strips critique of its transcendental properties, opting for a “historical ontology of ourselves.” Critique for him takes the form of a “possible border crossing,” and thus the creation of a new “limit-attitude” (Foucault 1997: 315) This new boundary is in fact an enabling of the quest to break through the barriers of the historical present above and beyond the permanence that Foucault claims toward preventing positive social and political change. Critique requires imagination, reinvention and experimentation, a theme prominent in the writings of Dewey. For Dewey, inquiry begins with the formulation of a problem and ends with what he calls “warranted assertability” (Dewey, 1938: 7). By warranted assertability, Dewey is referring to a type of ‘test of truth’ in relation to “the end” of social inquiry; it is neither a “belief” nor is it certain “knowledge” one can arrive at, but denotes a procedural strategy one uses in the continual process of inquiry (Dewey, 1938: 4–9)

It might justifiably be asked: Why even burden Foucault with the label of “humanist”? Why not call his later work on ethics something else, something that would distance him from a doctrine he found to be so insidious and delimiting? To have a humanistic account of subject formation does not entail a commitment to ahistorical, transcendental or metaphysical “truths.” Foucault’s conception of the human subject is very different from the version espoused by those who resort to universalist foundations for an ethical grounding. There is no attempt by him to formulate, in the complex interplay of social forces, an all-embracing, totalizing conception of the human being. Foucault’s humanism stresses the agonal, procedural and embodied facets of human existence. The methodological refusal of the transcendental amounts to an ethical principle which affirms the practical attainment of the broadest scope of freedom possible. Foucault here enters—however tentatively—into the territory of a philosophy of the subject by making the ideal of freedom a semi-regulative principle, and indeed this introduces a tension in relation to his refusal to formulate a normative theory. But, along with his introduction of freedom as an ideal is his insistence that we problematize existing forms of social organizations, and thereby open up a space for the practice of human freedom through ethical resistance.

Foucault rejects the juridical model of critique, since that would mean aligning freedom with Kantian autonomy, conceived of as univer-
sal self-legislation. To resort to the transcendental would be to admit that there is a fixity attached to limits, but Foucault conceives of limits as historical and contingent. And, although he does not formulate a general ethic, he does posit an ideal of emancipation, thus tacitly presupposing Kantian normative theory. The goal of critique is to promote the widest notion of freedom possible; in this sense, his methodological refusal of the transcendental turns out to be an ethical principle which affirms the desirability of struggle against limits (Cutrofello, 1994: 26). The goal of enlightenment for him is an enterprise which should seek to link the progress of truth and the history of liberty “in a bond of direct relation,” but this does not mean that one has to choose between the “good” and “bad” elements of the Enlightenment (Foucault, 1997: 312–17). Rather, we must adopt a historically pragmatic approach in order to determine not if, but how, we have been affected by the Enlightenment and how we can constitute ourselves as autonomous subjects. Our forms of critique must therefore be practical, a work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings. Above all else, says Foucault, limit-testing must be a practical, as opposed to transcendental, endeavor, and its coherence will be brought out in the process of putting historico-critical reflection to the test of concrete practices (Foucault, 1997: 312–17).

This essay has argued that such concrete practices are, in Foucault’s later view, concerned with the formation of identity and self-invention, and that such formations are exemplified in one form of limit-testing: cultural and social movements which have as their defining agenda ethical self-invention. These practices can thus range from educational programs and the rediscovery and revival of traditions to engagement with global political and economic structures that are forms of embodied, pragmatic humanism aimed at the recovery of the self and others living within communities. They are, in short, practices of freedom. These practices require, Foucault believes, agonal subjects who stylize the concrete possibilities which present themselves as practices of liberty. And that is why, as James Bernauer points out, Foucault is, in the end, in notable ways far removed from Nietzsche in that his work would have otherwise terminated in “a splendid solitude, foreign to any form of human solidarity and sense of common fate” (Bernauer, 1988: 71).

Ironically, Rorty’s remark that we should see Dewey as “having already gone the route Foucault is traveling” and Foucault as attempting to arrive at the point Dewey had already arrived at (Rorty, 1982: 207) more or less accurately anticipated the “route” Foucault eventually took. By theorizing the interiority of the subject enmeshed in one-sided power relations, Foucault concludes that criticism must become aware of itself; by acquiring an enlightenmentality about the status of our intelligence and its ability to reconstruct experience, pragmatic humanism can work
Towards an always partial, open-ended inquiry into the ethical self-constituion of the subject.

To act as human subjects is to exercise our subjectivity in contingent social and political formations. To be human means to have the capacity to make our own ethico-political choices within systems of power. We can make these choices by undertaking a genealogical deconstruction of our identities, through a historical reconstruction of our experience as human subjects, and through ongoing agonal struggle in an arena where individuals—both together and alone—can change the conditions under which they are constituted. It is that struggle, the struggle towards something positive, that lends substance to a Foucauldian defense of many of the rights defended in the humanist tradition; it is just that the grounds for their defense are, as Thiele notes, different (Thiele, 1990: 919). We cannot defend human rights or our self-creating constitutions by resorting to a Kantian, already defined conception of being. But we can search for a more pragmatic approach as a grounds for ethical action. By conceptualizing human rights and self-creativity as ongoing responses to constructions and contestations, we can both avoid essentializing ontological claims and ameliorate the conditions that make struggle necessary in the first place. Foucault’s “pragmatic humanism” must thus be understood as a naming strategy for that which escapes naming; it is a recognition that, as human beings, we are never final in the sense of being completed projects, for to be a completed project means that there is, as both Dewey and Foucault would remind us, no work left to be done.

Notes
1 This is not quite the debt of “irrationalism” and “unreason” that Foucault owes to Georges Bataille’s reading of Hegel and Nietzsche (Pfenris, 1991), but a common emphasis on the reconstruction of experience serves, in both cases, to short-circuit the absolute standpoints of Western rationality as embodied in the subject.
2 Arguably, the impetus behind Foucault’s initial letting go of the notion of self-transcendence had its origins in a surrendering of the Marxist conception of self-transcendence of (bourgeois) reason and the adoption of a critique of instrumental reason with regard to the human sciences (Wellmer, 1991).
3 Rorty, on the other hand, sees Foucault as an individualist ironist who believes that socialization is “antithetical to something deep within us” (Rorty, 1989).

References


