

**Green Governmentality and its Closeted Metaphysics:  
Toward an Ontological Relationality**

by

Sébastien Malette  
B.A., Laval University, 2004  
M.A., Laval University, 2006

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of the Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in the Department of Political Science  
with a concentration in Cultural, Social and Political Thought

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University of Victoria

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## **Supervisory Committee**

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## Abstract

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Several scholars are now examining the emergence of ecology as a means for achieving tighter governmental regulations under the label of what they call green or eco-governmentality. Adopting Michel Foucault's historical ontology, one of their critiques consists in problematizing the notion of Nature at the core of environmental debates as a political construct modulated by the historical conditions in which it finds itself. One implication of this is that "Nature" has no normative implications except the ones we collectively fantasize about. Such a critique is often perceived as a threat by many environmentalists who are struggling to develop a global and intercultural perspective on environmental destruction. This dissertation suggests that Foucault's critical project should be examined from a more thoroughly ecological standpoint, leading toward the adoption of a broader, less ethnocentric and anthropocentric ontology. It explores the possibility of rethinking the concept of Nature at the core of political ecology from the standpoint of a relational ontology rather than an historical ontology. It argues that a relational ontology offers a possible alternative to historical ontology by posing our relations to "Nature" not through the metaphysic of will and temporality assumed by Foucault (by which he asserts a universal state of contingency and finitude to deploy his critical project), but through a holistic understanding of Nature in terms of inter-constitutive relations. By being relational instead of historical, a relational ontology contributes to the formulation of open-ended and dynamic worldviews that do not operate against the backdrop of a homogenizing form of temporal universalism or constructivism, but rather poses the immanent differences and processes of diversification we are experiencing as the unifying and harmonizing principle by which we can rethink a more thorough egalitarian and non-anthropocentric standpoint for ecological thinking. Such a differential—yet shared—understanding of Nature could facilitate the development of an intercultural and non anthropocentric perspective on environmental destruction.

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“You are what your deep, driving desire is.  
As your desire is, so is your will.  
As your will is, so is your deed.  
As your deed is, so is your destiny.”  
*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad IV. 45*

## Introduction

Several scholars are now examining the emergence of ecology as a means for achieving tighter governmental regulations under the label of what they call green or eco-governmentality. Adopting Michel Foucault's treatment of ontology, one of their critiques consists in problematizing the notion of Nature at the core of environmental debates as a political construct modulated by the historical conditions in which it finds itself. One implication of this is that "Nature" would stand without any normative implications except the ones we collectively fantasize about. Such critique is often perceived as a threat by many environmentalists who are struggling to develop a global and intercultural perspective on environmental destruction. Discussions between Foucault's critical project and ecological thinkers have been mostly at a stalemate ever since. This dissertation aims to contribute to both the field of Foucaultian studies and environmental philosophy by engaging critically the ontological assumptions by which green governmentality scholars problematize the concept of Nature.

My central argument will mainly engage with the critical *ethos* embedded in Foucault's notion of governmentality, and its subsequent usage in the work of green or eco governmentality scholars. The work of Foucault is well known for its examination of "the conditions of possibility" of both what we perceive as "regimes of truth" and our political practices, as well as the multiple relations between the two which comprise various ethical regimes—which could include ecological ones. Hence Foucault's work—especially on governmentality—offers a powerful tool kit to investigate the rationalisations of our political practices both beyond and below their usual templates (state, citizenship, political regimes)

which are currently under increasing pressure due to the emergence of various ecological rationalities of government. Such a tool kit allows us to interrogate how we govern ourselves and others from the standpoint of managing conduct, i.e. as a “conduct of conduct” operative within the parameters of our “freedoms” and the limits of our milieu. Yet, according to Beatrice Han, Foucault’s critical project cannot overcome a dualistic tension at its very core (Han 2002). This tension is expressed in an oscillation between the assertion of various empirical realities and the examination of the synthetic operations by which we have come to understand them (through various systems of knowledge, political practices and ethical regimes). In other words, Foucault’s critical project can never overcome the dualistic tension between the transcendental and the empirical inherited by the Kantian anthropological consecration of the modern Man, understood as both the subject and object of his own knowledge. Such tension between transcendentalism and empiricism is only re-inscribed within the framework of an historical ontology through which Foucault believes he can sidestep the problem of transcendentalism by historicizing and politicizing the conditions of possibility of human knowledge. The limit between the empirical and transcendental at the heart of the Kantian project would be basically subsumed under an historical ontology according to which all human experiences and their foundational assumptions—including natural ones—are viewed as finite and contingent by virtue of their own historicity and political negotiations.

After examining the current fragmentation and absorption of the ecological movement by what appears to be an overarching rationality of government—a rationality best described by Foucault’s notion of governmentality as applied by green governmentality scholars—the second part of my dissertation will engage Foucault’s ontological assumptions—assumptions that enable his critique but that are bound up with the rationality he puts into question. I wish

to suggest that Foucault's critical project should be examined from a more thoroughly ecological standpoint, leading toward the adoption of a broader, less ethnocentric and anthropocentric ontology. As such, I am neither advocating for obvious institutional changes, nor for any quick-fix solutions to the complex arrangements between our conceptions of politics and Nature that have led to the creation of a predominantly Eurocentric, exploitative, materialistic and anthropocentric global way of life. To challenge the complex sedimentation that has led to our modern ways of life, I rather suggest the adoption of a relational\critical *ethos*: that is a dynamic and open-ended shift in our attitude, sensibility and awareness (rather than a fixed solution) that may encourage us to rethink the ways in which we conceive ourselves in relation to the differences we find both in our human and non-human encounters, including with this irreducible, symbiotic and dynamic diversity I call Nature.

To do so, I shall explore critically the ontological and metaphysical assumptions embedded in Foucault's critical *ethos* endorsed by Green governmentality scholars. The solution I propose revolves around the possibility of rethinking the concept of Nature at the core of political ecology from the standpoint of a relational ontology rather than an historical ontology. A relational ontology would offer a possible alternative to historical ontology by rethinking our relations to "Nature" not through the metaphysic of temporality and will assumed by Foucault (by which he asserts a universal state of contingency and finitude to deploy his critical project), but through a holistic understanding of Nature in term of inter-constitutive relations. Such holistic understanding of Nature would shift the focus of our primary understanding of politics and critique from what Freya Mathews calls our relentless "commitment to the new" (articulated here in term of indefinable freedom and resistance) to a broader appreciation of our ecological relatedness and ontological interdependency in terms of dynamic homeostasis, involving here a quest to achieve an integral respect toward all the beings we currently

perceive through our disenchanted and materialistic paradigm of Nature and matter (Mathews 2005, p. 11).

By being relational instead of historical, a relational ontology provides the basis for an open-ended and dynamic worldview that does not operate against the backdrop of a homogenizing form of temporal universalism or constructivism, but rather poses the immanent differences and processes of diversification we are experiencing as the unifying and harmonizing principle by which we can rethink a more thorough egalitarian and non-anthropocentric standpoint for ecological thinking. At the center of our argument lies a simple claim: although a historical ontology can certainly be interpreted as relational to a certain extent, I suggest that it modulates unnecessarily our relations to Nature and human cultures through a specific metaphysics and understanding of historicity and is plagued by Eurocentric and anthropocentric tendencies. I will ultimately argue that the differential—yet shared—understanding of Nature provided by a relational ontology could facilitate the development of an intercultural and non-anthropocentric perspective on environmental destruction.

My project raises the central question of how such an ontological standpoint would impact already existing political rationalities and institutions. Are we facing the birth of an over-deterministic logic of governance using Nature as a means to achieve tighter governmental regulation in the vein of what has been described by Michel Foucault as biopolitics? Or are we witnessing a genuine “paradigm shift” in the way in which we understand the connections between the state of interrelatedness we find in Nature, and our cultural, political, economic and ethical practices, which could be a bridge to a differential mode of thinking, without being dissolved by the usual charges of relativism or nihilism, the political principle of having to live together, humans and non-humans alike?

To explore these questions, the first part of my dissertation will examine the emergence of political ecology as various rationalities of government, through the work of green governmentality scholars. Following the work of Eric Darier, Paul Rutherford and Timothy Luke, I will examine the emergence of various rationalities of government and technologies of power which aim at modulating, shaping, and regulating our relations to Nature. After exploring the strength of such analyses, I will examine the ontological assumptions couched in the green governmentality studies which can be traced back to Foucault's own work and use of historical ontology.

The second part of my dissertation will examine the limitations of confining the concept of Nature to the framing of historical ontology. More specifically, I will suggest that such historical ontology draws on some specific metaphysical and cosmological assumptions belonging to the cosmology and epistemology of Christianity. I will use the work of Michael B. Foster to illustrate how such understanding reflects a secularized Christian conception of linear time and a metaphysic of will taking the form of an ontology of praxis. Although stripped of origins, teleology and agency by Foucault, this temporality still places us all in a unique time-space that we must recognize and understand in a specific way if we are to be critical and hence free from the deterministic effects of our history. My dissertation will illustrate the difficulties for a Foucaultian approach to imagine Nature other than in terms of a specific understanding of temporality which encloses everything there is as necessarily finite and contingent. I shall argue that when Foucault fixes time as he does to enable his critical project, he is subsuming our experience of Nature under a specific ontology which not only remains anthropocentric in tone, but also culturally biased in scope. More precisely, I will suggest that such an ontology is a by-product of modern culture—rising from its widespread

endorsement of materialism, its disenchantment of Nature, its discursive solipsism and its obsessive commitment to change *per se*—rather than a critique of modernity as it is often assumed by supporters of Foucault’s critical *ethos* (Mathews 2005, p. 11). As such, I will defend the argument that it forecloses cross-cultural and cross-experiential possibilities of imagining Nature and alternative patterns of critical thinking.

I shall conclude by exploring a relational way of relating to Nature, one in which even historicity becomes a matter of relations and where no absolute or ontological concept may hold except relationality itself. Inspired by the work of Arne Naess, Harold H. Oliver, Freya Mathews and Robin Durie, I will propose that such an ontology may produce a relational approach in which Nature does not have to be reduced to a social or historical construction, nor to an objective reality we ought all to agree on, but can rather be depicted as an interrelated matrix in which differences are precisely generated by infinite and fluctuating relations. Such an approach would not only deepen a relational dimension we already find in Foucault’s notion of the “problem of government,” but would also distance itself further from anthropocentric and Eurocentric views when it comes to the formulation of the basis of political ecology—that is the harmonization of our practices with Nature. In sum, a relational ontology could facilitate a different understanding of Nature, which, in turn, would imply not only a re-articulation of the notion of eco or green governmentality, now asked to step outside its anthropocentric and Eurocentric scope, but also for the critical project of Michel Foucault, now invited to think our practices of freedom not so much against the backdrop of a historicity made of finitude, praxis and mere contingency, but through the immanent and interrelated field of differences we are experiencing in Nature. This could help us to move beyond our comprehension of freedom modulated as this obsessive drive to constantly innovate for the sake of innovation, toward the adoption of a renewed ecological ethics based

on an ontological approach genuinely interested by the challenge of reaching out to what stands beyond our solipsistic representations of Nature: an ontology that could encourage us to pause and listen to the multiple voices of Nature with less of a paranoiac and arrogant attitude.

**PART 1:**  
**THE CULTURE OF MODERNITY AND THE EMERGENCE OF ECO-**  
**GOVERNMENTALITY**

## Chapter 1:

### Managing the Environment: Nature as a Problem of Government

“The phrase ‘an age of ecology,’ which came out of the celebration of the first Earth Day in 1970, expressed a grim hopefulness that ecological science would offer nothing less than a blueprint for planetary survival. Unfortunately, there were too many contending builders to settle on that blueprint. Ecology achieved intellectual sophistication, academic, and financial security in postwar years, but also lost much of its coherence. It broke down into a cacophony of subfields, including ecosystematists, populationists, biospherians, theoretical modelers, forest and range managers, agroecologists, toxicologists, limnologists, and biogeographers.”

Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy*

The emergence of a global environmental crisis challenges many political, social and economic features of the culture of modernity. The emergence of an environmental crisis which involves phenomenon such as global warming, the acidification of oceans, the depletion of species and the loss of arable lands, questions the limitations of the nation-states to respond to predicaments that often go far beyond their capacities to legislate and take action. In the case of colonial states, the ecological problems associated with the exploitation of resources and territories which belong to its first inhabitants often trigger debates about the legitimacy of political models mostly imposed by the settlers on the Indigenous peoples. The trans-national implications of many environmental problems also put considerable pressure on the discipline of international relations. This discipline and the institutions it has generated are often accused of being largely ineffective, if not in connivance with the highly-industrial and powerful nations-states mostly responsible for the ecological deterioration the world is currently experiencing. In other words, the dualism by which an inside\outside division establishes the space where politics becomes possible (the state), and an anarchical space where it is not (the international space), is seriously put to the test by environmental problems which override the boundaries of modern politics.

Yet, despite the challenges addressed to the culture of modernity, environmentalism is also generating various political rationalities which aim at shaping human behaviours through their ecological modulations. As Weber's assessment of modernity suggests, the spread of such rationalities would entail a managerial and instrumental *ethos* more than an ethical re-examination of our relations with Nature. The rise of environmentalism would contribute to the creation of eco-management tendencies, often relegating ontological and ethical discussions about Nature to academic philosophers. The domain of political ecology would not only broaden the scope of the instrumental rationalities and the cult of innovation for the sake of innovation they serve, which are the hallmarks of the culture of modernity, it would also propagate the seeds of this managerial *ethos* beyond the traditional enclaves of modern government.

### 1. Nature in Peril: Modernity, Globalization, Ecocide

The processes associated with spreading the culture of modernity have been increasingly accused of putting "Nature" in peril. In the last few decades, many ecological organizations have pointed their fingers at the global expansion of industrialism, consumerism and capitalism as new ecological villains. From acid rain, soil erosion, the destruction of forest covers, and smog alerts to nuclear clouds and global warming, the environmental consequences of the spread of industrialism, mass consumerism, individualism and the increasing deregulation of a now global "market-society" built on the ideological premises of ferocious competition for profits and infinite growth, have led some scholars to describe the current situation as an "ecocide" in progress (Bender 2003). The risk of ecological annihilation caused by the global spread of what is loosely described as the outcomes of the culture of modernity is now challenging many of its core political institutions and rationalities. The realization is that the pollution of oceans cannot be contained by national

boundaries alone, that no private land may resist on its own the dissemination of toxic gases or the greenhouse effect, and that the problem of resource depletion is ultimately everyone's problem. The burning of fossil fuel, the massive emissions of nitrogen oxides, the acidification of oceans, the loss of biodiversity, and the elimination of the great Rain forest, (to name just a few problems) have caused increasing stress on the physical environment which now threatens human and non-human species alike (Chasek, Downie and Brown 2006). Not only are the ecological consequences global in scope, but they also have a profoundly adverse impact on the world's poorest people and some of its most subtle bioregional cultures (M'Gonigle 2008). Furthermore, ecological predicaments come with a myriad of other problems and challenges. Among those, we find the decreasing capacity to feed human populations due to soil erosion, the overspecialisation of crops due to a global economy ready to trade food for energy (ethanol and corn for example), the rise of national militarism due to conflicts over vital resources such as fresh water, and the risk of new pandemics spreading through the aggregation of populations still plagued by poverty, gathering in slums in hope of a better future.<sup>1</sup> The processes associated with the global spread of industrialism and capitalism not only destroys their own conditions of possibility, namely the resources they consume in ever greater quantities at an ever greater speed, but also the natural foundations upon which human and non human life depend (Commoner 1971, pp. 294-5; quoted in Carter 1999, p. 18).

All these concerns have sparked a plethora of environmental discourses arguing for re-structuring or re-conceptualizing our relations with Nature so as to provide for the

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<sup>1</sup> As Carter quoting O'Riordan reminds us: "the recent reports of the global environment predicament... pinpoint the fact that a combination of population growth, neo-colonialism, national militarism, and multinational capitalism are both encouraging and forcing third-world economic elites and peasants alike to destroy vast areas of habitable rural and urban land through aggressive overexploitation and the dangerous addition of chemicals and other pollutants. In the case of many peasant communities, these forces are propelling them to destroy their only real asset—their land—often against their better judgement and certainly against their will." (O'Riordan 1981, p. 386; quoted in Carter 1999, p. 16)

development of sustainable societies and environmental justice.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, we find supporters of authoritarian-conservative approaches for whom an increasing centralization of power and control over institutionalized violence still appears as the best remedy to the various crises humanity may encounter, including ecological ones (Hay 2002, pp.173-93). On the other hand, we find supporters of socialist, anarchist and deep ecology approaches confident that current environmental problems can best be solved by a profound reconfiguration of our modern ways of life, including the power dynamics at play. We also find various thinkers for whom the entry of ecological thinking into politics would be safer under the guidance of the democratic and liberal *ethos* that Western civilizations have crafted to ensure universal progress and ultimately save the world from the “barbarity” otherwise pervasive (Ferry 1992; Hayward 1995). Of course, the emergence of the environmental movement cannot simply be reduced to green delineations of conservatism, liberalism, socialism and anarchism. We find numerous environmental approaches mixing or borrowing solutions from every ideological corner, making it difficult to understand their positions strictly in term of the Left versus Right or any other consistent political taxonomy. We also find ecological thinkers who deliberately attempt to distance themselves for the dominant social, political and economic representations which would somehow make uniform the culture of modernity.

Yet, it seems that most of the political solutions proposed by environmentalists remain largely articulated within the framework delineated by the culture of modernity. Stemming from the assertion that nation-states are increasingly challenged by ecological problems, we find, for instance, the solution of creating a “global Leviathan” capable of planetary coercion on these matters (Mander and Goldsmith 1996; Kuehls 1996; Liftin 1998; Breitmeir, Young and Zürn

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<sup>2</sup> The term “Nature”, for example, is used in the First principle of Rio Declaration on Environment and Development: “Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with *Nature*.” Emphasis is mine.

2006). We also find the idea that, while humans are not likely to comply without coercion to eco-friendly behaviours, creating a “world government” is too dangerous and/or inappropriate for such challenges (Hay 2002). We also find scholars suggesting that an ecological society can only emerge via the development of social organizations operating through decentralized, classless and direct democracies fixed at a local level. In sum, few original solutions for environmental politics have been recently formulated outside the usual debates, alternatives, and solutions crystallised by the culture of modernity.

On the other hand, it appears that the rise of a global environmental crisis has made some of the major aspects of the culture of modernity problematic. Shifting away from the classical problem of sovereignty to the issue of achieving ecological forms of democracy, we find, for instance, scholars criticizing the common idea that liberal-democracy is the best political regime to deal with our ecological predicaments (Plumwood 1996). A democratic regime is often described as helpless to enforce unpopular decisions geared to save the planet from the destruction caused by an excess of individualism and mass consumerism. No one would be ready to give up so easily the freedom of being a consumer to whom nothing is ultimately refused. Many environmentalists are also critical of the modern faith in the development of technologies as vectors of human progress and civilisation (Drengson 1995). They accuse technological and industrial societies of destroying cultural and ecological diversity by homogenizing the different human life-styles through the consumption of an ever growing quantity of natural resources, threatening the balance and diversity of ecosystems. As a result, we find a growing number of environmentalists questioning the validity of a leading assumption supporting the economic ideologies upon which modern politics has been predicated: unlimited economic growth (Costanza, Segura, and Martinez-Alier 1996; Daly and Townsend 1993). The project of developing sustainable societies would principally

follow from the consideration that there are ecological limits to economic growth which most of our economic and sociological models did not predict, at least not from an environmental perspective (Eckersley 2003). It is quite clear that natural resources are limited while human populations are increasing exponentially (Meadows and al. 1972). The central question, asked by the World Commission on Environment and Development twenty-one years ago, is quite simple: “how can we sustain a human population of twice the size relying on the same environment” (Kuehls 1996, p. 75)? Echoing this interrogation with a catastrophic prospect, the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment of 2005 depicts a grim picture, stating that “nearly two thirds of the services provided by Nature to humankind are found to be in decline worldwide” (DeSombre 2006). The realization that the planet has environmental limits to sustain an ever increasing human population comes as a real challenge for a political system and an economic order cruising along with the promise of perpetual growth as the ultimate regulator of peace, social order, good governance, and freedom.

Oscillating between affirmations that our global environmental crisis is triggering one of the most significant paradigm shifts in Western political thought, and allegations that the rise of environmentalism is incapable of moving beyond the culture of modernity, one thing appears certain: the sense of an imminent crisis is palpable. The future seems to depend on an environment capable of providing for our needs at a time when the channels which once allowed deferring environmental and other resource extraction problems to some “distant lands” and colonies (or, more recently, the so-called Third-world countries) are shutting down at a rapid pace. A solution is indeed desperately needed in order to create a sustainable future which is lacking the infinite resources our economic models need in order to fulfill their promises of universal wealth and growth: a solution which would allow the so-called post-industrial societies to keep their level of comfort and opulence, while articulating a rationale

for inviting non-Western societies to embrace the modern lifestyle predominantly developed in the West (free market, mass market consumption, liberal and democratic state, and so on). The rise of an environmental movement challenging the eco-predation of the Western modern culture could not come at a better moment, or so we think.

## 2: The Environmental Movement: A Brief Overview.

The existence of an environmental movement is a recent phenomenon in modern history. It emerged through a growing number of conservationist and environmental organizations exerting pressures on governments and publicly campaigning for the implementation of environmental policies and social justice. The exact origin of such a movement is hard to pinpoint with precision. We know that the contours of an environmental movement gradually emerged as part of a larger counterculture movement associated with antiwar and antinuclear grassroots organizations during the 60s and 70s. The introduction of nuclear bombs surely transformed the face of modern warfare and international politics (Elliott 1978). It quickly came to symbolize the threat of nuclear conflicts resulting in huge ecological disasters and the potential destruction of Earth itself (Worster 1994, p. 342). The atomic bomb was, by definition, the ecological weapon *par excellence*; it targeted both human populations and the sustainability of their environment, inflicting a series of long-range adverse impacts.

Movements of mass-hysteria fearing nuclear attacks did not take long to spread among the populations antagonised by the Cold War. Doomsday scenarios of human life condemned to live in underground bunkers for hundreds of years were circulating widely. Furthermore, conducting nuclear tests and the disposing of radioactive wastes soon became a disturbing topic for many people preoccupied with the hazardous impacts of this complex technology.

It is, however, with the emergence of the New Social Movements—with the Vietnam War and the American Civil Rights as its main emblematic figures—that those apocalyptic stories took a sharp environmental turn. As part of a larger counterculture movement often referred to as the New Left, the environmental movement rapidly became a popular figure among the new social activists. Grouping in a decentralised and often disorganised fashion various causes such as women's rights, gay rights, civil rights, peace, anti-apartheid and anti-colonialism, supporters of the New Left departed from classical Marxist analyses of class alienation and repression to embrace a wider critique of the repressive and exclusionary social mechanisms from the standpoint of identity and culture. The New Left gradually moved away from traditional class and labour issues, to formulate a wider critique of the societal structures of discrimination, exclusion, authoritarianism and totalitarianism. Moving away from the goals of unifying the working class as the vector of social revolution, the social activists of the New Left mostly favoured solutions that encompassed participatory democracy, local activism, radical municipalism, and different strands of anarchism. Due to their reactions against exclusion as fundamentally unfair, inclusion as potential cooption, and authority as domination, the New Social Movements were, in essence, mostly constituted as a loose coordination of various grassroots organizations without any privileged center of decision. The New Social Movements are, in essence, inherently pluralistic, inclusive, unbounded geographically or culturally, and radically democratic in approach (Magnusson 1996, pp. 67-68).

Denouncing the exploitative structures of the culture of modernity in its treatment of Nature, the environmental movement rapidly became a predominant voice among the New Left. The violence and injustices denounced by classical Marxism concerning the alienation of the working class and the exploitative features of capitalism were soon modulated into cultural

analyses exploring how Nature became the object of blind exploitation and greed, the result of a culture that consistently ranked Nature as inferior to itself, a tendency amplified through the global spread of modernity and its favourite avatars, namely the scientific, positivistic industrial and capitalist revolutions. Merging with different strands of anarchism, noticeably in the work of Murray Bookchin, ecology was soon discussed as the refractor of various paradigms of domination succeeding one another, from the caste or class systems, the renewal of patriarchal and capitalist societies, to the domination of state politics (Bookchin 2000). It is, however, mainly through the spread of environmental discourses announcing an Age of scarcity and environmental limits to economic growth that the environmental movement came to be known to the wider public. With the publications of books such as *The Closing Circle* (1971) and *The Limits to Growth* (1972), culturally-based forms of environmental violence and exploitation caused by the spread of capitalism and its core belief in individually-based competition and unlimited growth (increasingly made invisible through the gradual exportation of the negative externalities to countries of the southern hemisphere) came to the forefront of public debates. What gradually came up was the description of a mode of exploitation perpetrated by our frenetic urges to squeeze all of what can be commoditised out of Nature, following a self-devouring logic by which surplus capital is reinvested in the development of new technologies by which more capital can be extracted through a relentless and pervasive competitive *ethos*, until resources can no longer be found. The denunciation of the ever-increasing rhythm at which natural resources were being pumped out to feed an insatiable society of consumption at the cost of mounting pollution produced a powerful apocalyptic story many had never heard before. Adding to previous charges of cultural imperialism, Western powers were now being accused of environmental imperialism and eco-colonization (Grove 1995; Crosby 2004; Sauer and Ham 2005).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For apologists of such imperialism see Rothkopf (1997). See also Daly, E. and Townsend, K. E. (1993, pp. 38–53) and Sauer, G. W. and Hamm, Bernd (2005).

Now it is important to say that the environmental movement did not reject outright the inputs of modern science or the benefits of modern technology when it came to demonstrating the danger of our ecological predation. The first photograph of Earth taken on November 10, 1967, for instance, is said to have had a profound impact on the spread of environmentalism (Luke 1995). Although the problem of pollution has long been understood by human societies, and was increasingly known through path breaking publications such as *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) and *Silent Spring* (1962), the use of satellites transfigured our understanding of the environmental problems by finally making Earth visible as a whole. The use of satellites, along with various meteorological installations and other scientific observatories, played a crucial role in the observation and causal demonstrations linking the adverse impacts of industrialism, consumerism, waste production, and the degradation of the environment as a whole. From outer Space, we could finally *see* and map the extent and progression of the adverse impacts of human activities on the planet. We could *see* and *measure* the progressive depletion of the ozone layer, the melting ice at the poles, the acidification of ocean, and the destruction of the Amazonian forests. We could realize the finite boundaries of our planet and the limited resources that we have to work with. The convergence of scientific and visual evidence soon made it undeniable that human activities had undesirable impacts on the environment. On the one hand, the evils of pollution and environmental predation through new forms of cultural imperialism conjured up the perfect storm for the New Left; although pollution surely affects everyone, it could be attributed mostly to the interests of a few, such as capitalist industrialists or the privileged countries of the northern hemisphere. On the other hand, the emergences of these new visual and analytic tools revealing Nature (either as a whole or as interconnected relations) generated the possibility for new forms of managerial sciences, rationalities of government and the

deepening of interventions targeting peoples and populations in relation to their environments at a degree of minutiae never witnessed before.

Massive political mobilizations did not take long to occur. On April 22, 1970, the organizers of the first Earth Day adopted the blue marble image of Earth as their main logo. This campaign became a pivotal moment for the emergence of a self-conscious environmental movement with the participation of more than 20 million Americans. Thousands of colleges and universities, which constituted the backbone of the new forces behind the environmental movement, organized protests against the deterioration of the environment. Many groups that had been fighting various environmental causes came to the realization that they shared common values. In 1971, the Canadian-based organization Greenpeace came into existence; it now has more than 2.9 million members across the world. In 1972, the protection of the environment was the subject of a UN conference in Stockholm, attended by 114 nations. Out of this meeting developed UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme) and the follow-up United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992. Other international organizations in support of environmental policy development include the Commission for Environmental Cooperation, the European Environment Agency (EEA), and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The environmental movement soon penetrated all spheres of political life with the creation and multiplication of local environmental organizations, green parties running for office (notably in Germany), and the creation of international organizations and NGOs. No longer gathering only radicals and hippies, the green movement was gradually integrated into mainstream institutions, becoming one of the leading subjects of the twentieth century. From a position of marginality, environmentalism soon became a political driving force to be reckoned with; it became the vector of a new problem of government penetrating all spheres of politics.

### 3. Environmentalism and Ecology: Toward a New Paradigm?

The successes of the environmental movement can be explained, in part, by the universality such causes were able to invoke, as well as the permanent capacity of the movement for renewing its struggle through new battles replenishing the enthusiasm of its supporters. The underlying assumption is that the exploitation of Nature is taking almost infinite forms, and that it affects ultimately everyone indiscriminately regardless of ethnicity, political, philosophical or religious beliefs. Yet, despite its growing popularity, environmentalism remained contested. It soon became the battleground for new disputes, forms of knowledge and philosophies. From its very beginning, the environmental movement referred to the science of ecology to formulate many of its justifications, arguments and counterarguments. The discipline of ecology as a “science” (emerging through the development of main disciplines such as limnology, oceanography and animal ecology) has itself been subject to many debates and disputes between the defenders of ecology as an experimental science, and the proponents of a more synthetic or holistic examination of the various relations between ecosystems and populations (McIntosh 1985).<sup>4</sup>

Despite the methodological, epistemological and ontological disagreements marking the development of a self-conscious ecology as a scientific discipline, it is possible to identify four broad assumptions attributed to ecologists: 1) everything is connected to everything else; 2) everything must go somewhere; 3) Nature knows best; 4) and there is no such thing as a free lunch (Carter 1999, pp.19-23; Commoner 1971). Of course, the question of what Nature

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<sup>4</sup> German Zoologist Ernst Haeckel, often regarded as having coined the term “ecology,” elaborated in 1870 on his earlier mention of “ecology” in those terms:

“By ecology we mean the body of knowledge concerning the economy of nature—the investigation of the total relations of the animal both to its inorganic and to its organic environment; including above all, its friendly and inimical relations with those animals and plants with which it comes directly or indirectly into contact—in a word, ecology is the study of all those complex interrelations referred to by Darwin as the condition of the struggle for existence (McIntosh 1985, p. 7).”

is, and how we can attribute a form of consciousness to Nature (that is without a clear center of agency that can be verified and tested) remains an open debate. And so is the question of knowing what interconnectedness exactly means or implies? Heavily influenced by Darwinism, notions such as evolution and the struggle for existence drawn into the development of the early science of ecology, were all predicated on positive and individualizing assessments of plants, insects or animals striving for survival, not an overall assessment of species in teleological or overarching directional terms (see Warming 1909 for example; quoted in McIntosh 1985, p. 43). The science of ecology was penetrated by the analytical influences and methodologies attributed to the Scientific Revolution, leading to the now dominant epistemic paradigm of “modern science.”<sup>5</sup>

As such, modern ecology challenged the tradition of natural history and its analogical classification in favour of a method of investigation based on inductive mode of reasoning, lab environment and experimental control—itself predicated on increasing technological development—isolating the studied variables to confirm inferential hypotheses or speculative theories. Under the influence of this paradigm, the ecological notion of interconnectedness came to signify that causal relations between independent ecological actors can be studied in all directions; that is in all directions which the researcher may see fit to better understand the dynamic adaptation and evolution of individualized members of what we identified as a species in relation to a particular milieu (whose dynamic nature precisely forbids any close or essentializing definitions). Supported by activities such as the spreading of industrial agriculture, forestry and pharmaceuticals, the science of ecology often served to yoke our better understanding of the relationships between plants, insects, animals and humans with their

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<sup>5</sup> I shall explore more recent works cross-referencing Chaos theory, post-mechanism physics and ecology in other sections

respective milieu, to some goal-orientated and intervening activities serving the best interests and needs of the members of rising industrial societies.

Such mechanistic and individualizing paradigms were however contested by other proponents of ecology such as F.E. Clement, who argued in favour of notions such as holistic communities of plant formations described as “super organisms” (1905, quoted in McIntosh 1985, p. 43). Here the notion of ecological interconnectedness came to signify that what we perceive as individualized actors are actually part of larger ecological organisms we need to better understand (themselves in relation to other organisms). Isolating artificially an individual part would thus defeat the purpose of understanding the holistic and dynamic nature of these organisms, leading the defenders of holistic approaches to ecology to emphasize studying plants, insects and animals in their milieu of origin. Thus, from the onset, at least two distinct approaches to ecology as “science” in which very different methodology and ontological positions can be seen were evident (McIntosh 1985, p. 43).

Despite the significance of the inner tensions in the development of ecology as a “science,” it is important not to conflate the science of ecology with environmentalism or conservationism. Broadly speaking, we can say that the science of ecology is examining the various life processes and their relation to biodiversity, the exchange of energies forming natural and dynamic cycles of adaptation, evolution and transformation, as well as the behaviours of plants, insects, animals and humans; while partisans of environmentalism or conservationism may rely on findings of ecology to support their argument in favour of conservation or environmental measures or policies. Yet, despite the commitment shared by most ecologists to the fact\value distinction informing the modern and positivist scientific paradigm of objectivity, the emergence of ecological sciences contributed significantly to spread the belief

that the slightest modifications in an ecosystem can have far reaching and sometimes devastating repercussions for all living organisms, including humans. The ecologization of our worldview through the growing contributions of ecological sciences contributed to highlight not only an equal importance to all living creatures when it comes to their ecological interdependency, but also the human capacity to alter and even destroy the natural conditions upon which the survival of all living beings depends. Many trained ecologists did not only reveal to humans that their survival depends on ecosystems of which they are an integral part, but they also warned people that their inconsiderate actions in ecological matters could lead to their own annihilation (most famously Aldo Leopold (1966) and Rachel Carson (1962)).

Such a warning was soon spread by the dissemination of various environmental discourses and ecological philosophies (Hayward 1994: 9). Influenced by the New Social Movements, the first wave of ecological discourses challenged many of the core political, economic, cosmological, epistemic and metaphysical assumptions which gave shape to Western culture. These aspects include Christian anthropocentrism and monotheism (White 1967), male dominated cosmology and symbolism (Merchant 1990; Mies and Shiva 1993), Cartesian dualism and subjectivism (Naess 2008), the culture\Nature dichotomy (Fox 1990; Descola 2005), and the supremacy of what would be called an industrial paradigm (Drengson 1995; McLaughlin 1993). These critiques have led some scholars to describe a necessary paradigm shift in the ways in which Western societies conceive their modes of social and political organization in relation to Nature. This paradigm shift, according to Robyn Eckersley, would represent “simultaneously a new environmental ethic, a new political ideology, and a new meta-ideology, signalling a broad cultural shift beyond humanism” (Eckersley 2003, p. 329).

#### 4. “Deep Green” Environmentalism

The exploration of new cultural\ecological paradigm(s) has been undertaken mostly by exponents of “radical” environmentalism and “deep green” sympathizers. The term “radical environmentalism” refers to various discourses proposing alternative ways of imagining politics in relation to Nature so as to free us from anthropocentric, Eurocentric, dualistic patterns of thought, exclusionary mechanisms, and hierarchical modes of relationship (Bookchin 1991; Merchant 2003; Serre 1990; Latour 2004). Radical environmentalism characterises movements such as social ecology, eco-anarchism, deep ecology and eco-feminism. For supporters of these “radical” approaches, the violence and inequalities perpetrated by class systems, capitalism, gender discrimination and other forms of social exploitation often reflect a series of deeper abuses committed against Nature. The assumption is that these abuses would have a better chance to be corrected if an ecological society were to emerge and perpetuate itself. Supporters of these movements often challenge deeper assumptions by which we assert and justify different hierarchical patterns, in particular, the ways in which we separate culture from Nature while asserting human superiority or supremacy. In order to create an equalitarian society inclusive of Nature, the exponents of radical environmentalism frequently advocate human-scale institutions and local communities which would favour face-to-face participatory democracy as a viable alternative to the centralist and top-down political systems. They also often criticize the notion of private property and the capitalist mode of production as the basis of our economic system.

Despite their differences and disagreements, what connects “radicals” is their critique of the mainstream or reformist environmental approaches which argue for the protection of the environment solely from the perspective of its instrumental value for humans (McLaughlin 1993). Environmentalists are criticized by radicals for being “reactive” when they appeal to an “endangered environment” only to serve pre-existing political views. In other words, their

defence of Nature is said to merely to serve the prerogatives of existing political agendas and ideologies, or to conform to some pre-existing dominant cultural framework or worldviews. McLaughlin's distinction between "reactive" and "ecological" environmentalism was formulated in similar terms by Arne Naess, one of the founders of the "deep ecology movement." In his famous article "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary", Naess states that the issues of pollution and resource depletion are connected to deeper concerns "which touch upon principles of diversity, complexity, autonomy, decentralization, symbiosis, egalitarianism, and classlessness" (Naess 1995, p. 3). Ecological considerations would therefore be intimately tied to how human societies govern themselves and to the values they hold in such matter, thus unsealing the distinction between fact and value held by the partisans of ecology as a strict "science." McLaughlin distinguishes the deep ecology movement from other forms of environmentalism that promote the supremacy of industrialism and its anthropocentric conception of Nature as a mere "resource" to exploit. Deep ecology supporters, on the contrary, adhere to an eco-centric and bio-egalitarian view of ecology. The anthropocentrism they denounce is in the way Western cultural, symbolic, religious and other practices—and their mainstream ontological, metaphysical and epistemological assumptions—are articulated along a series of radical distinctions between Nature and culture that place humankind as superior to all others species. Deep ecology supporters criticize a number of Western cultural and epistemological representations, ranging from our dominant conception of God as transcendental (beyond an inferior state of Nature deemed as "not pure" because of its inherent materialistic, contingent and impermanent condition), to the atomistic mechanisation of our views of Nature inherited by Newtonian physics (Fox 1990; Mathews 1991; Merchant 2003). Deep ecology supporters claim that Western culture has failed to take account of what constitutes the ontological relatedness of humans to non-humans beings found in Nature, and the qualitative diversity of

this relatedness. In a natural state of ontological relatedness, humans are only one part—yet of the greatest importance, like all parts—of the complex communities found in Nature.

Moreover, non-humans possess intrinsic or inherent values (as do humans, of course). Deep ecology supporters argue that we should not treat any life forms as mere instrumental beings which we use only to serve our wants and needs.

In their critique, Deep ecology supporters have integrated a number of philosophical influences (Quick 2004). They have, for example, integrated the different critiques of modernity articulated by the Romantic tradition and American transcendentalism. Influenced by thinkers like Goethe, Herder, Emerson, Thoreau and Muir, Deep Ecology supporters offer a strong critique of the domination of rationalism over all other modalities of human existence (intuitionism, spiritualism, aesthetics and so on). Many supporters of Deep ecology suggest that the dissociation between Nature (or matter) and mind assumed by Cartesian philosophy and Galilean and Newtonian physics should be incorporated within an organic, holistic and relational understanding of Being which unifies humankind and Nature (Mathews 1991). To achieve this unification many supporters of Deep ecology (just like Romantics before them) insist on spontaneity, intuition and creativity as part of the means by which one can reach a new sense of communion with Nature. The way in which this Nature\divine communion is viewed varies significantly among deep ecology supporters. Like most of the New Social Movements, the deep ecology movement claims to be inherently pluralist, non-dogmatic, non-hierarchical, inclusive and democratic. No preference for any meta-narratives (religious or cosmological) is formulated, except perhaps for what Arne Naess calls the interconnectedness of the “totality-field-image” of reality. Naess admits in the same way that the contours of his own ecosophy are “misty” and his normative propositions are fairly general, precisely to accommodate the numerous visions of Nature, and the new conceptions to come; everyone

would be encouraged to formulate his own ecosophy based on a personal and profound relationship with Nature. Just like the biodiversity there is in Nature, the various conceptions of Nature are portrayed as treasures to cherish, not things to reduce to a univocal truth or dogma (Naess 2008).

Naess' philosophical views offer some strong critiques of influential themes central to the culture of modernity, especially the Cartesian notion of the self, the atomistic and mutually-exclusive subject\object distinction, and the utilitarian view of Nature. Influenced by thinkers such as Spinoza and William James, the "I" for Naess embodies a "fluctuating material" described as a dynamic process of identification based on spontaneous empathy and sympathy within a milieu which is itself conceived as alive, relational and interactive (Quick 2004, p. 108). The "I" is thus dynamic, relational and transversal in exchanges with numerous environmental factors. It can take no precedence over the other in terms of subjectivist or objectivist formulations, for both exist simultaneously and are qualitatively irreducible to one another. Naess neither suggests that all forms of objectivism and subjectivism are wrong, nor that the self is only a mere epiphenomenon of its cultural, social, physical or political environment. Rather, he suggests that the atomistic, foundational and self-asserting ego is an incomplete and immature understanding of the complex relations by means of which we come to understand what is exterior and what is identical to ourselves (Naess 2002, p. 23). Hence, it appears that whatever exists holds a gestalt character, and so distinctness and similarity should both be perceived as primordial (Quick 2004, p. 113).

A number of epistemological, social and political problems are implied in the above critique. Epistemologically, the views of Arne Naess open up the possibility of investigating relations as constitutive of "things." More precisely, they open the possibility of analysing "relations,"

not only from the perspective of “things” as solid atoms assumed to have mechanical relations, but also from the perspective of the relations themselves as bearers of specific qualities by means of which “things” are dynamically and constantly relationally re-modulated and transformed. Moreover, by associating pluralism with gestalt theories, Naess introduces the possibility of a meta-ontology which gives precedence to the ecological relations by which we constitute our sense of “reality.” By giving ontological precedence to these relations, Naess illustrates that it is possible to go beyond the problem of the Particular and the Universal, which are often viewed in Western philosophy as mutually exclusive. Together, both can be conceived as primordial if “relations” are granted an ontological status; relations are both universal and particular if relations are conceived as the makers of all singularities emerging from their infinite interactions.

Challenging the dominant conception of the self, Naess’ eco-philosophy opens up human inter-subjectivity to ecological interrelatedness. Naess critiques our common understanding of identity which operates through binary and anthropocentric self\other and us\them reductionism. He invites us to go beyond this conception of a self-asserting logo-centric ego that would float in an abstract *Res extensa* to discover the thickness and complexity of ecological, transversal and trans-existential relationships. The latter participate in the construction of ourselves as “selves”, that is, as humans and natural inter-actors. Naess observes that by adopting both/and rather than either/or we can nurture cooperative and egalitarian relations, for we realize that our embedded and interrelated modes of existence are shared with the whole world. Furthermore, if we take seriously Naess’ critique of the atomistic conception of “thing” or “self” as irreducible holders of primary qualities (the color “red”, “freedom” or “sovereignty” for example), the idea of the state or the individual as this atomistic and autonomous entity becomes also problematic. In fact, the whole concept of

sovereignty framed in terms of an inclusive\exclusionary principle has to be revisited.

Although sovereignty offers clear settings that many people enjoy, it appears that numerous social, political, cultural and environmental problems override the strict delimitations of state boundaries. The artificial borders which enclose humans and non-humans alike (often reduced to state resources) do violence to the rich intercultural, biological, and the social-complexity taking place both beyond and below such political boxing. Broadening our understanding of this complexity could help us to think outside the confining logic of the state, since this configuration rests on an atomistic division of political space, supplemented by a monological reduction of human identities to mutually-exclusive forms of nationalism (Magnusson 1996, p. 40). Thinking outside the box by exploring non-dualistic models of interaction based on relational and ecological approaches could thus broaden the language and the possibilities for political alternatives to the relationship between universality and particularity, principally formalised as state sovereignty (The one), residing in the pluralist setting assumed by most international relations theorists (the Many) (Walker 1993, p. 75.).

With respect to “human freedom”, which is often conceived in terms of having sovereignty over oneself, the same relational considerations could be invoked. From a relational standpoint, freedom is not the “primary quality” of a distinct object/subject in the world. Freedom is rather a momentary crystallization of various relations understood and conceptualised by a dominant binary logic in terms of object/subject/quality. In other words, the freedom by which we experience a coherent and autonomous sense of self involves relationships, mutualism, empathy and sympathy with that which is other than oneself from the start (Naess 2008). In Aristotelian terms, no passage from potentiality to actuality could rely solely on its own; the passage to actualization requires numerous interactions which themselves can be viewed as integral to any state of actualisation. It follows that the whole

tradition which has organized the hierarchy of beings according to their level of autonomy—from the Prime Mover as the metaphysical and cosmological *Archè*, to the *Polis* deemed as the mature political entity by virtue of its autonomy as a social organism, to the consecration of human consciousness as superior because of its capacity of obeying its own moral laws—would have to be critically reassessed. The vertical and atomistic logic linking the dominant representation of God (or the first cosmological Grand cause), the notion of political sovereignty, and the liberal representation of the individual as a creature of free-will would have to be re-examined in light of an ontological relationalism. From the perspective of ecological relationalists, it is thus clear that the concept of autonomy central to Western culture from the Greeks onward is inherently flawed. In sharp contrast, a relational conception of autonomy and agency would invite a richer understanding of our ontological interdependency which would lead to different models of social and ecological interaction and mediation.

The different critiques offered by supporters of the deep ecology movement have inspired many to explore what is often described as a structural violence taking the form of exclusionary principles in relation to Nature and to the various cultures regarded as primitives for being either non-Western or non-modern (Devall 1988; Fox 1990; Mathews 1991; 2005). At a fundamental level, our ecological predicament appears as the magnifier of what is denounced as various anthropocentric and Eurocentric posturing and modes of exploitation already denounced by numerous postcolonial studies (Fanon 1965; Said 1994; Spivak 1988). Western culture, with its firm belief that it embodies human progress, has been guilty many times over of subjecting and destroying other cultures through the actions of missionaries, traders, military forces, anthropologists, settlers, and technological experts of all sorts (Scott 2005; Pels 1997). Only this time Western cultures, and the culture of modernity in particular,

are accused of destroying not only its own conditions of possibility, but also everyone else's. The gravity of the situation would thus require a broader examination of our metaphysical, epistemological, social, political and spiritual modes of representation and action, not just a technological fix or the greening of our industries and consumption patterns (Matthews 1991; Merchant 2003; Fox 1990). Politically speaking, this examination includes the ways in which the culture of modernity has drawn inclusive/exclusionary principles to rationalise and enforce its own political metaphysics. Such an examination brings us to ask how and why we came to privilege a specific understanding of politics, and how we came to accept its universal spread as something progressive. It brings us to the critical task of unveiling the cultural structures by which such an understanding became self-coherent and self-explanatory for its main benefactors, while excluding what is perceived to be different.

##### 5. The Reforming Standpoint: Environmentalism as Deepening Modernity

Unfortunately, deep examinations of Western culture are not so popular among reformist environmentalists and political elites. As David Carruthers illustrates, the first wave of works denouncing the unsustainable character of Western lifestyle was soon countered by various arguments to the effect that modernity could be rescued by adopting an ecological standpoint (Carruthers 2005). From the reformists' standpoint, the question was less a matter of the cultural or metaphysical representations upon which modernity is predicated, than of the solutions offered by better management and technological innovations. The popular assumption is that it should be possible for economic growth and environmental responsibility to merge harmoniously. The managerial solutions envisioned would be the greening of capitalism or socialism; that is the greening of industrialism and consumerism within the framework of free-market society for some, or through the socialisation and democratization of greener means of production for others.

For adherents of eco-socialism, there is a way to be radical without relapsing into green mysticism, jungle communes, or utopian anarchism. Protecting the environment is welcomed as a simple and effective way to reform socialist and egalitarian modes of thinking capable of disrupting the “business as usual” at the heart of capitalist societies. The concept of an “endangered environment” is often seized upon as something that might regenerate our dormant socialist impulses against what are regarded as the direct ecological consequences of class system, the logic of capitalism, individualism and irrational consumerism. Nature is portrayed as that which binds us all, as our ultimate common reality shattered by centuries of private appropriations and the implementation of state regimes and private estates serving the interests of the most powerful. With a striking resemblance to the closing argument of the Communist Manifesto, Nature often incarnates the ultimate materialistic foundation by which we could cut off seeking any other philosophical ground for actions: namely, the only real and true ground there is, the Earth (Weston 1994; quoted in Meyer 2001).

Green socialists often dismiss the views of deep ecology supporters as the reintroduction of forms of mysticism and naturalism that would be dangerously close to metaphysics akin to that of the *ancien régime*. They, however, agree with the vast majority of Deep ecology supporters in criticizing industrialists and capitalists for caring for the environment only as long as it supports their selfish exploitation of it. Missing a long-term and sustainable vision of the management of our collective natural resources, capitalism would lead not only to our social and economic impoverishment, but to ecological disaster by virtue of capitalism’s illogical and unsustainable tendencies toward perpetual growth and the maximization of profit. Recognizing that the environment belongs to the whole of humanity would therefore be the first step toward the development of more egalitarian *and* environmental policies. One of

the main arguments deployed by eco-socialists is that no one should be allowed to make personal gain and accumulate capital at the expense of all, our vital needs and our common environment. A socialist ecology geared toward the collective appropriation of the means of production, natural resources, and the development of greener lifestyles (such as eco-urbanism and green industries) would therefore be a viable alternative to what are described as the global and hegemonic forces of capitalism, industrialism, consumerism and individualism: that is an alternative capable of re-structuring our societies toward patterns of collectivism and cooperation rather than individualism, competition and inter-exploitation as the ideological pillars of our conception of freedom.

Adherents of green socialism are often reluctant to accept the concept of Nature as anything more than a social construct. While acknowledging Nature as a set of concrete constraints, green socialist Mary Mellor does not see the necessity of reading these constraints as blueprints for human behaviour. Socialism, she argues, overtly fights what prevents human beings from understanding that they can control their own future. For Mellor, “natural conditions are constraining but not determining” (Mellor 2006). Any supernatural or metaphysical or foundational philosophies invoking Nature as ultimate regulator of our social behaviours are depicted as illusions (God, Nature, the laws of the Market). Neo-liberalism is not the only ideology under scrutiny here; supporters of Deep ecology are also accused by Mellor of evoking some kind of external and supreme truth to regulate the course of human freedom. Mellor goes as far as comparing their doctrine(s) to neo-liberalism, which calls upon the “natural laws” of the Market to regulate and organize our societies. The only difference would be that the speculation over “natural laws” is not to be found within the “laws” of the Market, but within the intrinsic value of every living creatures and ecosystems. The results for

Mellor would be quite similar: such naturalism would lead us to alienate our freedom by accepting the supremacy of some natural and often irrational hierarchical social order.

For the supporters of green socialism, Nature is not something sacred that humans ought not to disturb, transform or exploit. Although an ecological direction can be taken to do so, it is suggested that humans ought to transform their natural environment to meet not only their basic needs, but to create equalitarian and sustainable communities. Consequently, the project of returning to ancient or pre-industrial conditions of living (an argument rarely endorsed by supporters of deep ecology themselves) is viewed not only as undesirable, but also as impossible on a large scale. Even on a small scale, the project of creating pockets of self-sustainable communities is denounced as something that has very little impact on the structural injustices generated by what is now a global capitalist economy in action (such communities still operate under the rule of acquiring private property for instance). Rather than idealizing a romantic and nostalgic return to some pristine Garden of Eden, technological and industrial developments are depicted as forces working for the benefit of the whole of humanity and its betterment. For followers of green socialism, there would be no way to eradicate world hunger, to distribute basic goods to the masses, to provide lodging, or to deliver standardized education without the help of technology, industrialism and the concentration of human activities and talents allowed by modern urbanism. The anthropocentrism and industrialism criticised by supporters of deep ecology and other environmentalists would not be an evil to fight, but a testimony to common sense.

Supporters of eco-socialism further argue that even the scientific assessments by which an “endangered environment” is understood could only be possible through the division and specialisation of labour generated by technological and scientific developments many

ecological thinkers condemn. The production of ecological “scientific” knowledge needs the modernisation of human societies. Aesthetic judgements and other subjective considerations about Nature would most likely fail to convince and enforce the tough decisions we collectively need to make to reverse not only egoistic patterns of consumption, but also the domination by the industrial bourgeoisie and its political allies. Only a verifiable and accurate mode of knowledge exposing the particularities of our current ecological situation can mobilise enough people to start and sustain the green revolution we need. The production of such knowledge needs the division of labour and the technological inputs by which the scientific demonstrations and debates are made possible. The development of a sustainable, equalitarian and ecological society would only be possible through the collective and democratic appropriation of the industrial and scientific means of production. Because they would be no longer captive of private interests and the capitalist logic of endless profit and growth, such collective appropriation and empowerment would offer the best framework for the subsequent greening of our societies. Only when the industrial, political and scientific centers of activity are free from the grip of capitalism and the individualistic savagery it induces, will we be able to genuinely serve the Common Good. In other words, it is not by re-assessing what Nature is or is not from an intrinsic and normative standpoint that we will generate the environmental and societal changes we need; it is rather by collectivizing the dominant modes of production and by unmasking the dominant classes that squeeze humans and Nature alike to extract all the surplus-value they can, that we will initiate the popular resistance we need to bring about an ecological and equalitarian society.

## 6. Liberal Counterpoints

Agreeing that we cannot deduce anything normative *per se* about Nature is liberal environmentalist Marcel Wissenburg, for whom no ontological hypothesis based in Nature

should limit human freedom. While acknowledging that even liberalism contains “thin” or minimal ontological views about Nature, Wissenburg agrees with the adherents of socialism that Nature should not be valued for its own sake. Such an ontological questioning of Nature would be useless; Nature should only be valued because “it *is there* as an option, to be appreciated or not” (Wissenburg 2006). Freedom and innovation are therefore the core values we should defend when it comes to the formulation of environmental policies. Nature could only be valued because of its purpose, not because of its inherent value, nor because it would bind us in redistribution obligations that would precede our natural freedoms or right to property. And besides, we may add, green versions of socialism do not address the danger of totalitarian green socialism and the possibility of conflict emerging between socialist communities in a world where ecological territories often overlap, while resources are being increasingly scarce.

Nature, Wissenburg suggests, could only be valued by those who generate values: that is human beings understood as free individuals. Within a liberal and “open society” individuals are free to express their own values within rational limits: that is, as long they respect the Rule of law, democratic ideals and the non-harm liberal principle. Of course, the non-harm principle can be interpreted in an extensive ecological light that may problematize the liberal locus of decidability in such matters (the individual viewed as an independent and discrete entity). Wissenburg appears to be among those who argue that there is no way of assessing objectively the inherent values of Nature. One individual (or a group of individuals) may share a normative conception of Nature, others may not. In a liberal, pluralistic and democratic society where procedural justice comes before the different visions of the Good assumed by citizens, no such conception of Nature can be imposed on others. Although Wissenburg insists that “negative liberty” is not enough to answer all ecological challenges

we are facing, and that we must recognize the limits of “liberal neutrality” when it comes to environmental politics, the question for Wissenburg is not whether liberalism is green or not, but to what extent such politics can combine the maximization of democratic freedom and the project of creating an ecological society (Wissenburg 2006, p. 31). The ball would therefore be in the camp of environmentalists who must make sure that their visions of a green society respect liberal and democratic values, and not the opposite.

From the liberal perspective, the demonising of capitalism, free market institutions, industrialism and technology by radical environmentalists seems immature, even dangerous. The political tradition of liberalism, it is suggested, is not the outcome of evil powers imposed by mysterious tyrannical forces dropping from the upper classes through the course of history, but the result of various enterprises and movements springing from the intrinsic and natural desire to better one’s life and condition. Such aspirations have sprung from the quest for freedom from centrist or imperial powers (nationalism and the balance of power), societies of hereditary privilege (liberalism), and religious dogma (rationalism and the rise of experimental science), as well as freedom to retain, use or freely trade businesses and private property, including land (capitalism), to ensure a fair division of power, accountability and the protection of fundamental individual human rights against the tyranny of any government (modern constitutionalism, humanism and the rule of Law), and to provide cheap and abundant food and other goods to a majority of people (industrialism and the pursuit of technological progress). Overturning these historical gains in favour of some form of green communism or other form of socialist authoritarian or decentred governments would endanger the structural social processes that assure maximum peace, wealth distribution, cooperation, and freedom.

Liberal institutions such as the “free market” are thus deemed perfectly compatible with a green plan that would encourage environmental options for consumers (Crawford 1991; Patridge 1987, quoted in Hay 2002, p. 226). Green liberals claim that there is no need to provide a substantial or “thick” vision of the Good, or any metaphysical or ontological account about the nature of Nature to achieve a society that is ecologically sustainable. With its capacity to generate a spontaneous, unfixed and decentred social order with minimum governmental intervention, the mechanism of free trade operating through the “free” and “rational” choices of consumers, combined with a growing demand for environmental products, would be the best solution for ensuring the greening of a free and open society. Spontaneous economic exchanges offer the advantage of creating a social structure in need of minimum coercion from external and paternalistic political authorities. According to neo-liberal theorists, only this economic structure can disintegrate otherwise static hierarchical governmental institutions and the elitist culture it generates (Hayek 1960; Friedman 1962). The ordering principle of the Free market, which emerges through the interdependency of competitive international markets and the maximum of free entrepreneurship, is supposed to be the perfect mechanism to prevent the governmental abuses we have witnessed with the rise of national dictatorship, fascism, social Darwinism, sentimental cults of Nature, and other extravagancies inherited from German Romanticism, now re-emerging with the rise of self-righteous environmental alarmists and mystics (Ferry 1992). It is furthermore suggested that the choices of consumers for environmental friendly products within a free economy could help not only the establishment of an ecologically sustainable society, but also contribute to renewing the base of modern industrialism and potentially save millions of jobs: all this with minimum intervention on the part of governments (Susskind 2002). Rather than being seen only as the sources of environmental degradation, Western modernization, the free market and industrialisation are praised by liberals for offering the best solutions for our ecological

predicaments, while defending against totalitarian forms of government (either on a local, national or global level).

Stavins and Whitehead subscribe to a similar position when they suggest that only within an “open society” can environmental transformation and legislation effectively occur (Stavins and Whitehead 2005; see also Hailwood 2004; Redcliff 1984). For many defenders of environmental liberalism, the remoteness and the level of abstract thinking inherent in the bureaucratic system needed by any centralizing and intervening government to operate (including green ones) would only be disastrous for environmental solutions, which are depicted as always context-sensitive. Only a democratic society working through the flexibility of a market-society and guided by the rule of law could provide the orderly decentralisation needed to do so. The alternative of creating decentralized medieval-style communities in an environment where natural resources are unevenly distributed would make the world relapse into chaos and violence. Furthermore, the implications of environmental reforms, it is suggested, would rarely be something the majority of the people could grasp and rightfully ponder, let alone a centralised and remote authoritarian government and its army of policing bureaucrats. Environmental solutions would be best known by the communities that are directly affected by the ecological problems in question. In other words, no overarching ecological rationality of government would be capable of predicting or controlling our ecological predicaments; our best option would still be the mechanisms of Free Trade and market transactions which would offer the best decentralised, multi-dimensional and non-coercive mechanisms to ensure the fair and rational distribution of goods and services, which would include in an ecological Free Market the rare and the scarce services provided by Nature.

Many liberal environmentalists propose similar economics-based solutions to our environmental predicaments via so-called mixed approaches of cost-benefit analysis. The cost-benefit analyses suggest for the most part that the wild areas and other ecological concerns could be effectively translated by money-measured equations (Kneese 1980; Pearce 1983; Markandya et al 1990; quoted by Hay 2002, p. 202). Such a view posits that one of the best solutions to the current ecological crisis is to include all environmental resources at risk in the present market system, a vision in which every plant, every ecosystem, and every animal would have an identifiable owner and a clear defender (F.L. Smith 1991, p. 599; quoted in Hay 2002, p. 220). It is suggested that most of the environmental problems we are now facing are due not to the capitalistic private ownership mode of social organisation, but to the absence of clear private ownership, legal representation and an unambiguous principle of accountability. Operating within an understanding of the environment in which everything is in constant flux, and where nothing tangible can be grasped and held identifiable would offer no clear way to delineate ownership or accountability, making the project of defending or protecting ecosystems or species in danger an impossible task. Given this lack of clarity, we could be helpless against the indifference and the greed that could lead most individuals to take whatever they need without any real fear of concrete retaliation. A private ownership system of everything Nature produces, it is suggested, would therefore ensure maximizing environmental sustainability, accountability and respect.

Another popular principle suggested by environmental liberals is the “Polluter Pay Principle” (PPP) according to which the users would pay for the harm caused to the land or resource used. Just like the mixed cost-benefit approaches, the main idea behind such a principle is to attribute a tangible value to environmental services in the interest of ecological sustainability (Stavins and Whitehead 2005, p. 334). Such measures, it is suggested, possess the advantage

of converting all ecological impacts into a singular unit of measurement, namely dollars. Such tangibility would help to underline that environmental services are not free. Furthermore, PPP would help polluters internalize the cost of the degradation of the environment they are using. By transforming or integrating what we currently perceive as Nature into a market system where we pay for what we use, abuse and borrow, humans would be more inclined to handle natural resources with care. A penalty system targeting private users would be perfectly compatible with the judiciary and property regime already in place, ensuring a smoother and more responsible transition toward the creation of ecological societies, minimizing the disturbances of what would be generated by some grand green revolution.

Paradoxically, supporters of liberalism are therefore using the Market as both a freeing and disciplining device to green our behaviours, as something that frees us from the tyranny of abusive government on the one hand, while implying the multiplication of some structures of control and policing to enforce principles such as the PPP on the other. Moreover, the green versions of liberalism are not addressing the issue that larger business or multinationals, which are often owned by a few individual profiting from their activities by obscene profits, may start to calculate that it is still worth polluting despite the environmental fines in place, or to buy their quotas to pollute legally out of other businesses because the profits to make exceed the environmental cost. Moreover, the liberal *status quo* doesn't address for the most part the current geopolitical situation of competing countries plunged in a global free economy at the mercy of multinational, countries that may reduce their environmental standards in order to welcome the creations of industries and jobs, which, democratically speaking, translate by votes which keep governments in power.

## 7. Green Authoritarianism and Conservatism

Supporters of a conservative approach often agree with liberals that the domain of environmental politics ought to be rescued from the Leftists and their poor understanding of human nature. Yet they also criticize the failure of conventional liberal politics, and the naivety of environmental activists who believe that no strong authority is needed to enforce environmental regulations, especially on a global scale. Heilbroner, for one, suggests that humans are characterized by a brutish propensity to violence and are incapable of peaceful social relationships without external constraints (Heilbroner 1974). For Ophuls the choice is even clearer: it is either the solution of some global environmental Leviathan or oblivion (Ophuls 1973; Ophuls and Stephan 1992). Hence, the success of enforcing environmental regulations and surviving the current ecological crisis would directly depend on the creation of an environmental Leviathan guided by values such as balance, continuity and stability. Sharing similar doubts, John S. Dryzek argues that countries with a tradition of adversarial decision-making (such as Canada, Britain, United States and Australia) have dramatically poorer records than countries where the ecological paradigm is descriptive, not merely prescriptive (Hay 2002: 229; Dryzek 1997, p. 142). Democratic regimes are deemed as perhaps not the best political regimes to face our environmental crises (Saward 1993).

Although supporters of what can be broadly identified as conservatism sometimes disagree on how and why we should achieve ecologically responsible governance, they often share a common faith in the accumulation of wisdom by tradition and stress the importance of venerable institutions such as family, law, rightful authority, religion and nationalism (Hay 2002, p. 179). We are recommended to trust such accumulation of wisdom to make difficult decisions, like the ones regarding the destruction of our global environment and the imperative to intervene. In extraordinary situations, such as great environmental perils, the occurrence can require the limitation of our freedoms and rights. Facing what Garrett Hardin

called the “tragedy of the commons”, the liberal solution of strengthening individual and capitalist ownership over environmental resources is discarded in favour of the exact opposite: restricting the freedom of individuals. The current environmental crisis, it is argued, is too complex to be reduced to a single solution based on economic redistribution on an individual level. Hardin suggests, among other things, restricting both reproductive (1973, pp. 177-89) and outdoor activities (1974b) to deal with the problems of an overpopulated planet and the disturbance of wilderness by recreational activities: such measures exemplify the urgent and profound restrictions we would face, if the ideas of Hardin were enforced. Hardin goes as far as opposing immigration, humanitarian help, and food relief offered to the Third World countries plagued with famines. Hardin opposes these solutions on the basis that they would only ameliorate but not solve the problem of an overpopulated planet and the ecological peril associated with it. Famine and disease are in fact depicted as the natural equalizers by which Nature regulates the danger of too many humans on this finite planet (Hardin 1977).

Drastic authoritarian solutions that impair individual freedoms are not advocated by all exponents of conservative approaches. The spectre of centralization and governmental intervention often associated with communist and fascist regimes, and what is viewed as their legendary lack of understanding of human motivation, makes Hardin’s suggestion unpopular among many Conservatives. For Roger Scruton, the cultivation of love for one’s country appears as a better solution. The notions of sacrifice, commitment and attachment to one’s homeland and family would indeed be the best enticements to *conserve* and *transmit* what we have ourselves once enjoyed to future generations, including Nature and the quality of the environment (Scruton 2006). Love would allow us to transcend our individuality, without giving up our freedom through the adoption of a green authoritarian form of government. In other words, the power of intergenerational ties and the love of the *concrete* Nature that one

sees as a homeland are the best incentives for good environmental policy. Love would even allow us to limit growth, without eradicating private property, democracy or the power of free decisions. Expanding one's love toward all countrymen and future generations could facilitate the making of compromises to safeguard the integrity of one's own land. Such identifications and sentiments would by the same token invigorate the much needed political mobilisation against possible abuse or intrusion from outsiders, including NGOs such as Greenpeace, viewed by Scruton as non-accountable, self-righteous and non democratic organizations.

Of course, Scruton's solution implies that everyone would love his or her country (irrespective of the country in question) in the same way and with the same intensity that Scuton is assuming he loves his, an assertion almost impossible to confirm. But the problem outlined by Hardin and other militants of green authoritarian solutions is precisely that we cannot achieve such loving or sacrificing consensus on an individual basis, which is inherently conflictual and fragmented when it comes to environmental issues. Simply put, the individuals who directly benefit from environmentally degrading practices will most probably oppose the decision of other individuals to stop these practices, simply because the benefits of these harmful practices for the environment surpass their consequences for people whose livelihood depends directly on these practices. Hence the need for authoritarian green measures which plunge us back into question of legitimacy for coercive actions. Who could enforce authoritative measures, and to what end exactly? The countries that Scruton wholeheartedly endorses are nationalistic enclaves established in face of migratory communities such as the Roma in Europe or on lands taken from Indigenous communities such as the First Nations in North America. Their legitimacy as authoritative political spaces is problematic to say the least. In any case, the solution of invoking authority (or any Grand solution) assumes knowing already what is right for the people concerned. The larger the

spectrum of an authoritarian decision is, the wider the knowledge of what is deemed necessary and the consequences attached to such decision is assumed to be held by its maker. Such a principle may be useful in extreme situations in which the variables and their consequences can be clearly identified—and again the danger and addiction to obedience ought to be properly considered as suggested by the Asch conformity experiments (1951) or the Milgram experiment on obedience to authority figures (1963)—but can hardly make sense in an ecological setting in which complexity and diversity are precisely what are at stake.

#### 8. Green Beyond Borders: Toward an Eco-Cosmopolitanism

Cosmopolitan scholar Andrew Linklater agrees that an emotional response is central to the project of expanding environmentalism as a global concern (Linklater 2006, p. 110). An anxiety for the wellbeing of humanity and Nature as a whole appears vital to the spreading of a new environmental ethics. Linklater suggests enlarging our sense of community by bridging different philosophical approaches to form an interconnected vision of Nature and the promotion of an ethics of responsibility critical of the promotion of an atomistic self as the sole recipient of rights and freedom. Supporters of cosmopolitanism disagree, however, with the idea of promoting nationalism to ensure better environmental or democratic politics. Love for one's country would be insufficient when it came to safeguarding interests that extend far beyond national borders. Reinforcing nationalism would in fact offer very little help when it comes to the protection of something that transcends artificial borders, ethnicity, language or cultural distinctions. Nationalism would on the contrary lead peoples to act selfishly to protect and promote their own national interests. Far from increasing cooperation when it comes to global environmental regulations, the promotion of nationalism would keep people and communities apart from one another.

What would be needed is a concrete sense of community which did not have to coincide with the atomistic understanding of this political entity called the sovereign nation-state. In other words, what would be needed is the development of a broader consciousness capable of encompassing the world. To achieve this broader consciousness, the sentiments of loving one's family, culture and homeland are surely crucial to the creation of a fairer political community, but they would remain insufficient. Love, it is suggested, should ultimately embrace the vision of a community of fate beyond the artificial border system which often makes us feel as strangers or competitors, if not pure enemies. According to supporters of green cosmopolitanism, the environmental problems we are currently experiencing are greater than the ones which keep our nations and countries apart. For instance, the melting of Earth's polar icecaps or the destruction of the Amazonian forests affects the wellbeing of every human and non-human being on the planet, irrespective of national borders and political territorialities. In fact, there is no reason why an emotion such as love should be restricted only to what we can immediately feel, see or touch, either on a local or national scale. One could feel love or display a caring attitude toward an idea such as the state of relatedness which binds together all the different communities and ecosystems across the world. Moreover, love does not necessarily have to be restricted to the immediate empirical realm from which it is experienced. There are indeed plenty of cases showing that peoples care for environmental issues often far away from their home. The Clayoquot standoff first between environmentalists, and then between First nations, and the logging industry and the government of British-Columbia over the preservation of an old growth Rain Forest in British Columbia is a perfect example of this (see Magnusson and Shaw 2003). This conflict has generated not only local and national mobilisations, but also international protests to save an old growth forest many of its defenders never even visited.

But spreading emotional reactions to ecological disasters is not enough for many supporters of the environmental movement. The dissemination of an environmental *pathos* alone does not address the larger problem of coordinating various systems of justice, values, worldviews and the different and sometimes conflicting conceptions of the Good. It does not address the structural problems of uneven opportunities and accessibility to natural resources, jobs, food, education, water, and justice. Promoting love and empathy is a good place to start, it is suggested, but it is not sufficient to address the fundamental questions involving environmental justice on a global scale. The same critique can be addressed to spiritual movements of ecological liberation. Green beliefs and contemplative ways of life would just not be enough to achieve the global transformations required to secure a sustainable global environment affecting the actions of everyone. The search for some democratic mechanisms of global coordination, accountability, enforcement is needed if we wish to solve issues like global warming and the acidification of oceans. Expanding the liberal framework from a national to a global space appears therefore a reasonable and achievable solution to resolve the ecological crisis for supporters of Green cosmopolitanism. It offers an expedient solution to our lack of imagination for alternative forms of politics. Creating global institutions that can move beyond our cultural particularities by adopting, for instance, an ecological version of Rawls's theory of justice (through the use of the veil of ignorance, the use of overlapping consensus, and so on); institutions that can assure a fair political representation via their democratization; institutions that can be checked and balanced via the use of constitutions and reviewing committees; institutions that can guarantee the free access to the relevant information and secure our freedom of speech and consciousness appear good and practical solutions to many (Rawls 1971, Rawls and Kelly 2001).

The need to increase human cooperation toward concerted ecological actions, to structure the examination of scientific evidence while minimizing partisanship, and the necessity to enforce political decisions all seem to require the creation of a global process which necessitates both political coordination and political decision making. Achieving a global form of eco-governance and a reasonable notion of environmental justice to ground our collective decisions (that is a notion of justice that is open to compromise while committed to the principle of non-contraction as minimal standard of discussion) would therefore constitute the central objectives in edifying an ecological version of global politics. Green or eco-cosmopolitanism seductively offers what is often deemed to be the best compromise between the search for environmental justice beyond borders, culture and ethnicity. It formulates a powerful narrative toward the production of a global politics which recasts the problem of the universal and the particular with a grand spin quite appealing to many. Unfortunately, if a cosmopolitan green solution is modulated in a “top to bottom” fashion and enforced by the current international players and dominant institutions as they stand (the World Bank, the IMF, or the G8, for instance), then many challenges in terms of poverty, political self-determination and structural injustices (both economic and militaristic) remain, especially when it comes to the equal participation of the so-called emergent countries, the different political actors whom the International system excludes *de facto*, not to mention the reparations due to Indigenous peoples worldwide by countries whose creation was attended by genocidal violence and other unspeakable crimes (Ruether 2008, Chossudovsky 1997, LaDuke 2008).

## 9. Discussion and Conclusion:

Our overview of the emergence of a global environmental crisis and its political reception has shown that the environmental movement has made a profound and durable impact on local,

national, international and global politics. Reshaping many political debates, the environment is now a topic no politician can afford to ignore. The environmental prism now colors even conflicting values about how one should govern or manage society. Those values we have explored differ as much as they are in agreement. From a promising beginning, many critiques formulated by radical environmentalism have been challenged, assimilated, watered-down, or negated by competing reformist claims. Offering at first the grounds for opposing the global spread of the culture of modernity by providing solutions such as local or steady-state economies, bio-egalitarianism and the formulation of a relational *ethos*, it appears that so-called radical environmentalists, like most activists operating within the paradigm of the New Left, were not able to bridge their contentions with *viable alternatives* other than positioning themselves as pressure groups asking to be integrated or considered by existing powers. It is true that the environmental movement was able to offer a base for a longer-lasting struggle and a broader universality than many other movements of the New Left, but often only to reinforce the legitimacy of the dominant societal institutions to which they are addressing themselves.

Encouraging paradigm shifts and new forms of ecological consciousness seems incapable of avoiding co-option or dissolution within the dominant paradigms which inform the culture of modernity. These dominant paradigms have gradually sanctified individualism and competition as vital for genuine freedom. They have carefully separated facts and values while giving birth to a form of objectivism from which have sprung the human sciences and political economy. The latter have been developed as managerial sciences geared to standardized human needs formed within disciplining nationalistic enclaves. The possibility of mapping human behaviour at the level of their biological outputs, desires and aspirations through the use of statistics and various calculations has shifted the art of government beyond

the strict control of minds, feelings, allegiances and ideas. Ethical concerns of all sorts can be freely expressed without fear of retaliation, as long as human desires can find an appropriate niche in what constitutes a cyclical pattern of production, consumption, and reproduction, framed by a pyramidal redistribution justified in terms of “fairness” in what we believe is a just competition of all against all. In fact, we are encouraged to do so, for the exchange of free ideas and the various protest movements provide the best examples that democracy and human rights cannot only be respected, but can also serve as means to stabilize the managerial structures by which modern societies are best administrated. Thus are provided the dynamic upgrades necessary to reach an acceptable degree of governance whose limits are precisely outlined by consecutive waves of protest polishing the shores of legitimate government. Facing the rise of a New Left challenging all forms of political centralisation as totalitarian, exclusion as fundamentally unfair, inclusion as assimilation, and authority as repression, government officials can be reassured that it is only a matter of time before this critical posture turns against itself. At the very moment that the multiple voices of any component of the New Social Movements are asked by existing authorities to articulate a coherent platform for the sake of dialogue, the fragmentation of the former is almost unavoidable. Fragmenting and re-fragmenting itself constantly along new ideological lines, incapable of a unified voice for too long by fear of the totalitarian spectre, one thing remains constant: the consolidation of economic and instrumental forms of management geared toward the greatest satisfaction for the greatest number.

Deep ecology movements, green spiritual traditions and radical forms of environmentalism have avoided, so far, the problematic heritage of the New Social Movements focused on liberation as this perpetual need to resist. The green spiritual traditions have assumed the standpoint of a consciousness invited to move outward toward a more encompassing and

relational understanding of the Self, merging ultimately with the ecological well-being of all sentient and non-sentient beings. We should not underestimate the power of spirituality in political mobilisation, but it is yet not clear how a green spiritual movement would come to terms with institutional and power dynamics we find at the roots of the culture of modernity, even if everyone reached a state of ecological enlightenment. Disputes are more likely to emerge, even among “enlightened peoples”, especially where local politics is viewed as central to one’s liberty. The same criticism can be applied to Murray Bookchin’s ultra secular critique of domination. Using the environment as a mere refractor of humans abusing humans through various structures of exclusion\inclusion and hierarchy does not tell us how an anarchical society would deal with the same predicaments, once we are all anarchist enlightened people, not to mention the risk of intolerance and violence toward dissidents: a spectre somewhat already present in the vehement writings of Murray Bookchin (Kovel 1998).

The greening of the argument which favours localism, nationalism and globalism, placing the locus of politics in one of these locations in order to ensure the maximization of freedom, remains essentially the same. Framed by a tension between the blueprint of pluralism and monism framed by the quest to situate and maximize autonomy, the structure of what is an entity (as a discrete and self-sufficient entity) remains mostly unchallenged. The problem remains framed by the resilient notion of “limit”: that by which we may include and exclude political participation; that by which political autonomy can be determined. The problem also oscillates between the questions of knowing if there is an ideal blueprint or ultimate solution informing the ordering of human societies, and if so what would be the best way to conform to it (i.e. what is the best political regime?); or if no blueprint can be applied across the board because human practices would immanently inform the best political organization suitable to

each community in a pluralistic and dynamic way, in which case the question of what constitutes the boundaries of a political community and the locus of its autonomy are constantly reformulated anew from the assumption that they change all the time and that freedom can only come from such potential adaptation to transformations.

The ecologization of our political models has been to question the validity of our ways of conceiving entities in a self-contained fashion.

Gradually, the modernization of environmental debates through the greening of the various *topos* of modern politics has resurrected the usual alternatives between the reinforcement of states through variations of green welfarism; their being contested as privileged political spaces through localism and grassroots initiatives; and the production of global politics articulated along solutions of global centralism or international cooperation between nation-states. Such modernization has also recast popular dichotomies between fairness and equality, competition and cooperation, individualism and collectivism. It has sometimes generated surprise that there are these new ideological overlaps, re-shuffling modernity in quasi-original ways. However, most of the time, values such as equality, love, fairness and freedom have been instrumental as means to achieve specific ends within the setting of a disenchanting and pluralist paradigm. This would be “modernity”, where normative guidelines are used to shape, influence and modulate power relations, and “potentialities to differ” (freedoms) become the checkpoints one ought to carefully manage, as well as to permit.

Paradoxically, the decentralisation and constant re-modulation of power relations according to new ideas, antinomies, movements and the latest fashionable modes of protest and social criticism constitute the political horizon that allows the dominant capitalist system of

production and its adversaries to perpetuate themselves as conditions of possibility for one another. No capitalist society can exist without the competitive, dynamic, antagonistic and progressive *ethos* by which peoples beg to differ, beg to resist, and beg to possess forever more: this is how we came to understand the power of freedom. The mapping of the environmental movement as part of the New Social Movements—with its discontent with political centralization and authority; its boredom with long lasting struggles; its excitement with the shape shifting and irreducible aspect of cultures; its use of global media; its transversal mediums and punctual sites of mobilisation; its sense of purpose through perpetual resistance, and other agonistic practices for their own sake – shows exactly this. It shows that radical environmentalism, as shaped by the New Social Movements, operates on the very same frequencies as its favourite foes: capitalism, neo-liberalism, and the global spread of a free-market and entrepreneurial society. These common elements include a shared hatred of political centralisation, authoritarianism, totalitarianism, fixity of all sorts, assimilation, exclusion, restriction and conformism. These are the spectres that have driven the modernization of environmentalism toward more of the same problems generated by that *ethos*. It is not the absence of resisting energy that is lacking in contemporary environmentalism, but the failure to grasp and understand the underlying structures holding the antinomies that are presented to us as “genuine” options. What is missing in the work of many environmentalists is knowledge of their own position and the effects they produce within open-frameworks shaped through intersecting regimes of truth, which modulate the ways in which we perceive how we should govern ourselves and others in ecologically sustainable ways. The question, I suggest, is one of governmentality, that is, the critical mapping of the ways that we perceive ourselves as beings in need of governance, in need of resistance, in need of freedom.

## **Chapter 2:**

### **Governmentality in the Work of Michel Foucault**

#### 1. Introduction

In the last chapter, I explored how the latest modes of protest and social criticism constitute the political horizon that allows the dominant paradigms informing the culture of modernity and their adversaries to perpetuate as conditions of possibility of one another. Shaped by the New Social Movements, the environmental movement operates ultimately on the very same ideological frequency as its favourite foes: capitalism, neo-liberalism, and the global spread of a free-market and entrepreneurial society. These common elements include a shared hatred of political centralisation, authoritarianism, totalitarianism, fixity of all sorts, forced assimilation, exclusion, restriction and conformism. In the end, it appears that the environmental movement, which first emerged as a radical demand for the adoption of a new societal paradigm, has suffered the fate of so many initiatives found in the New Social Movements: it has been fragmented into what is now a cacophony of voices modulating our ecological impetus to pre-existing agendas that often contradict one another; meanwhile the persistent forces of social organization at the roots of the phenomenon we call “modernity” only get strengthened by green regulation, which reinforces current political rationalities and technologies of power geared toward top-down modes of security and biological control.

The hyper-criticism we see emerging with the rise of (post)modern thinkers, often evoking some kind of immanent particularism taking the form of agonistic and morphing politics hailed as a “freedom in action” operating without the need for any persisting regulative ideals, is not estranged from such phenomena. This hyper-criticism enables the constant fragmentation of our regulative ideals, which are deemed to be merely transient and

contextually-bounded. Our modern cultures need such hyper-criticism in order to perpetuate themselves in accordance with the multiplication of a shape-shifting system of distribution, communication and decision which no longer needs the inputs of deliberative politics (or rationality for that matter, since it too must resist essentialization). The small pockets of politics that remain are now dictated by and large by anonymous and anarchical externalities with whom no reciprocal relationships are possible. I have thus suggested that it is not the absence of resisting energy that is lacking in contemporary environmentalism, but the failure to grasp the underlying structures holding the antinomies presented to us as “genuine” political options: in particular, the presence of a pervasive “rationality of government” supported by a specific understanding of Nature—a specific metaphysics—shaping our comprehension of politics as this strict anthropocentric quest toward an ever-increasing amount of undetermined freedom, which, ultimately, can only be fulfilled at the expense of any normative feedbacks coming from Nature. I have thus posited that the question is one of governmentality: the critical mapping of the ways in which we perceive ourselves as beings in need of being governed, in need of resistance and freedom, in this particular case from an ecological vantage point.

This chapter will explore Michel Foucault’s concept of governmentality before turning to the notion of eco or green-governmentality and its attempt to “politicize ontology” in the next chapter. Understanding the notion of governmentality in Foucault’s work, before exploring its adaptation by green governmentality scholars, is important if we wish to better understand the contribution of Foucaultian scholarship in this domain. Foucault’s contribution to our understanding of politics, power and the constitution of modern subjectivity is considered by many as one of the finest analysis when it comes to the examination of the complex ramifications between the various regimes of truth, practices of freedom and political

rationalities by which we govern others and ourselves. The critical thrust proposed by Foucault's genealogical investigation of what he calls "the problem of government" is hailed for having opened up new theoretical avenues which explore the allegedly contingent and always interested nature of the certainties by which we engage in power dynamics.

The account that follows will not just be an *apologia* for Foucault's critical *ethos*, however. Although Foucault's concept of governmentality helps us understand the underlying rationality of government we alluded to in our first chapter, his analysis is implicated in that rationality in so far as it depends on the critical *ethos* built into the notion of governmentality. This is especially so, when it comes to the question of ontology. In the second part of this dissertation, I will suggest that Foucault's critical *ethos* is trapped in a solipsistic and hyper-critical mode of thinking inherited from the ontological and cultural assumptions of modernity. More precisely, I will argue that Foucault's treatment of ontology and its anti-metaphysical posturing is the result of a series of cultural representations stretching back from the cosmological decisions inherited by the Christian doctrine of creation, to the rise of a scientific and industrial Revolution, leading to a very specific understanding of the question of Nature. Doing an in-depth critique of the ontological assumptions built into the notion of governmentality thus requires its careful examination.

To be clear, the project of drawing a complete account of the different subjects covered by Foucault in his notion of governmentality (pastoral power, *Raison d'état* and liberalism among others) is not my intention here. The task could not be contained within the limits of this chapter, and besides, many excellent studies have already been conducted on these subjects.<sup>6</sup> The goal of this chapter is rather to sketch the contours of the notion of

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<sup>6</sup>See Gordon, 1991; Dean, 1999; Barry, Osborne and Rose, 1996; Rose, 1999.

governmentality in hopes of providing a more robust explanation as to why the various modes of green political contestation or resistance explored in my first chapter appear to be increasingly co-opted by governing strategies and practices of regulation, renewing at even a deeper level the hegemony of the processes associated with modern governmentalisation that these green modes of political contestation opposed in the first place. I shall engage the ontological and metaphysical assumptions I associate with the critical *ethos* inherent in governmentality studies when it comes to its treatment of Nature in the following chapters.

In this chapter, I will first explore Foucault's microphysics of power and the way in which his methodology allowed him to track reversals in power dynamics. I will then examine the transition between Foucault's microphysics of power and the "problem of government" by which he answers the accusation of neglecting the macro dimension of power and deepens his own views on resistance and freedom. To conclude, I will critically engage Foucault's *ethos* of freedom by arguing that such an *ethos* can be interpreted as a product of advanced modes of liberal governmentality. Although Foucault's approach better explains why resistance can always become the next mode of domination, while providing great insights about the constitution of an all-pervasive governmentality predicated upon the pre-eminence of political economy, biological considerations and security concerns as rationales for regulating and governing people through the use of various technologies of power (including statistics), I will suggest that Foucault's *ethos* of freedom is itself the ultimate psychological consecration and internalization of advanced forms of liberal governmentality. Freedom here is interpreted by Foucault as this "will to resist" whatever political rationality attempts to frame freedom, however this endeavour itself appears to be the product of the liberal governmentality outlined in his critique.

This analysis will allow me in the following chapters to argue that this Foucaultian “will to resist” is deployed against the backdrop of a historicity composed of “events” understood as positive, finite, necessarily transient and temporarily irreversible (thus linear), which, according to Foucault, can be studied independently of their attributed meanings and authors. I will suggest that these assumptions about how the world is constituted (*i.e.*, Foucault’s metaphysical and ontological assumptions about temporality and finitude) are intimately tied to Foucault’s critical *ethos*. This will lead me to investigate the relation between politics and ontology, and more specifically the politicization of ontology by Foucaultian studies. My overall argument will be that both Foucault’s *ethos* of freedom *and* the ontological assumptions that enable it suffer from anthropocentrism and Eurocentrism.

## 2. What is Governmentality?

In the late 1970s, Michel Foucault re-engaged with the power\knowledge relations that he had previously analyzed under the rubric of the “microphysics of power” to articulate what would become a genealogical examination of the problem of government. He did so by examining a number of modern state apparatuses and rationalities of government, linking together population management, political economy, and the question of security (Foucault 2004d, 2004e; Gordon 1991). As many have suggested, Foucault’s analysis of the micro, disseminated, and ever-shifting locus of power\knowledge came to maturity with the publication of *Surveiller et Punir* in 1975 (Foucault 2004a). He then refocused his genealogical lens on “the problem of the government” (Dean 1999; Rose 1999; Gordon 1991; Burchell 1996). This shift was mainly in response to two critiques: that he had neglected the “macro” (*i.e.* the state) in favour of the “micro” and that he had portrayed power/knowledge relations in a way that suggested that any project (or subject) of emancipation was doomed

(Gordon 1991). By addressing the problem of government more directly, Foucault was able to show that these critiques were misguided.

In 1981, Michel Foucault articulates a new site of problematization described as the project of producing a history of the techniques and rationalities by which one becomes a self-caring and truth-self-referential being (Foucault 2001f, p. 1032). Retrospectively, this “new site of problematization” described by Foucault can help us to better understand the overall directions undertaken by his work. Foucault situates this new site at the juncture of two themes describing his previous work: a history of subjectivity and an analysis of the forms of governmentality. On the one hand, Foucault’s history of subjectivity is described as a series of studies which investigate the various assumptions upon which our unified understanding of rationality and “normality” have been historically, contingently and positively constituted (Foucault 2001f, p. 1032). The governmentality studies, on the other hand, consist of those oriented toward two main objectives: (1) criticizing the usual conceptions of power largely represented as a unitary system (that is to say power conceived as organized around a unique center by which it is then carried out according to its internal and ongoing repressive character); and (2) analyzing power as a domain of strategic relations through which individuals and/or groups generate various attempts to “conduct the conduct” of others within particular institutional, social, procedural and technological framework (Foucault 2001f, p. 1032).<sup>7</sup> Foucault’s studies in governmentality can be summarized as an attempt to contrast the whole juristic/sovereign tradition, first by examining the decentred tradition of “disciplines”,

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<sup>7</sup>For Foucault, power should not be conflated with pure violence or total domination. Power is not something that can be owned exclusively at the expense of someone else who would then be completely powerless. Power is rather depicted as a series of exchanges, always reversible, which delineate the identities, positions and the next possible moves of those who constitute themselves (and are constituted) through these exchanges. The notion of power is understood as being similar to a “field of forces” which is also shaped by the exchanges happening between the agents. Foucault’s notion of power therefore presupposes (although not in a phenomenological sense) the existence of freedom by which the agents can embrace, shift, disrupt or resist the various and polymorphic ways power manifests itself.

and their subsequent reframing within an art of government described as “biopolitics” (Tully 2003, p. 495).<sup>8</sup>

Governmentality is a complex notion. The term itself refers to different processes even in the work of Michel Foucault. It furthermore seems to override the now classical divisions made by Foucaultian scholars to understand Foucault’s sinuous intellectual journey between what is commonly referred as the archaeological, genealogical and ethical periods of his work. At the risk of some oversimplifications the intellectual journey of Michel Foucault can be divided along two main theoretical axes: one which looks at the ways in which humans understand and govern themselves through the production of various truths; and a second which problematizes the production, reproduction and transformation of these truths in relation to the authority conferred on specific individuals or institutions within modern societies (Ashenden and Owen 1999). Within these two axes, three major fields of investigation can be delineated: 1/ an historical investigation of the discursive practices by which are delineated the contours of a particular *episteme* that modulates the apprehension of truth in specific and often disrupted ways (archaeological studies); 2/ an investigation of power relations as open tactics and strategies which are not only conceived as mere practices of domination or simply reduced to simulacrum, but rather as inducing pleasure, knowledge, various manipulations and self-reflective activities (genealogical studies); 3/ an investigation of ethical practices which explores the inputs\outputs of self-reflective practices in relation to various power\knowledge formations which lead to “practices of freedom” by which the self is

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<sup>8</sup> As Mitchell Dean puts it: “Foucault’s argument that we have entered into a phase of ‘juridical regression’, despite the proliferation of the framing of constitutions, codes and the ‘whole continual and clamorous legislative activity’, is an assertion that the function of the law as a coercive technique of sovereignty has been displaced and reinscribed in its role in normalizing power” (Dean 1999, p. 119). This displacement will be addressed in greater detail in my section on liberalism as a mode of governing.

apprehended as an object of truth (Malette 2006, p. 3).<sup>9</sup> It can be argued that the notion of governmentality comprises all three fields of investigation mentioned above, despite its strong genealogical undertone.<sup>10</sup> Governmentality studies still examine various texts and discursive practices using Foucault's archaeological framework, but they are explored in conjunction with non-discursive technologies of power as well as numerous techniques of the self, revealing the presence of economies of power Foucault precisely attempts to circumscribe.<sup>11</sup>

In his lecture entitled "Gouvernementalité" (February, 1 1978), Foucault describes "governmentality" as a historical process by which (A) an emerging regime of government started to take "the population" as its object coincidentally with the emergence of "political economy"; (B) a regime of government different from the strict power of sovereignty and disciplines; and (C) a regime of government deploying various apparatuses of security and managerial mechanisms geared toward health, wellbeing and economic considerations (Dean 1999, pp.19-20).<sup>12</sup> In short, the notion of governmentality would describe a historical process by which the medieval institution of the state has been progressively "governmentalized." Mitchell Dean summarizes this "governmentalisation of the state" in four discrete but overlapping components: (1) the dissociation of government from sovereignty; (2) the elaboration of practices and rationalities of government; (3) the transformation of the exercise

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<sup>9</sup> A precision on Foucault's notion of ethics: as Ian Hacking formulates it: Foucault "did not think of the moral agents as something universalizable, apt for all rational beings. On the contrary, we constitute ourselves at a place and time, using materiel that have a distinctive and *historically* formed organization. The genealogy to be unravelled is how, as people in civilizations with *histories*, have become moral agents, through constituting ourselves as moral agents in quite a specific, local, *historic* ways"(Hacking 2002: pp. 2-4). The emphasis is mine.

<sup>10</sup> Foucault's work on governmentality integrates both his archivist, genealogist approach and his later work on ethics and freedom in an innovative way.

<sup>11</sup> As Darier puts it: "The concept of 'governmentality' developed in the genealogical period not only offers a way into a historical survey of the conditions of the emergence of the modern form of power called 'government'; it also incorporates an archaeological understanding of knowledge (hence 'power/knowledge') and a tool with which to examine conditions for the emergence of the problematization of subjectivities, as the 'ethical', 'final' Foucauldian period suggests" (Darier 1999)

<sup>12</sup> The lecture "Gouvernementalité" (February, 1 1978) was published when Foucault was still alive. It was published in Italian by P. Pasquino in *Aut Aut* 167-8, September\December 1978 (Burchell and al. 1991) and in English by Rosi Bradotti in *Ideology and Consciousness*, 6 (Dean, 1999, p. 8).

of sovereignty by government; (4) and the emergence of a distinctively non-political sphere constituted by processes that can be represented as being outside government, but also necessary to the fulfillment of governmental objectives (Dean 1999, p. 103).

Foucault's work on governmentality, however, is more than just an examination of the historical itinerary taken by the modern problem of government. The genealogical exploration of "the problem of government" not only deepens Foucault's analyses on sovereignty and biopolitics; it offers an analytics of government which refines both Foucault's theory of power and his understanding of freedom. Responding to critiques directed against his genealogical approach found in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault's work on governmentality led him to rethink his whole work as introducing "points of resistance" which facilitate the emergence of "counter-conducts", increasing by the same token what he calls "practices of freedom." To be clear, the notion of "governmentality" offers an "analytics of government" that can be deployed both beyond and below the historical realities first examined by Foucault. Such analytics of government reshape and expand the terms of political debate "enabling different question to be asked, enlarging the space of legitimate contestation, modifying the relation of the different participants to the truths in the name of which they govern or are governed" (Rose 1999, p. 277). Governmentality studies unlock the inter-constitutive relations between "truth" and "politics" which classical philosophy has attempted to conceal on numerous occasions by enunciating a range of successive "universal truths" that would stand outside the reach of the contingency and disruptiveness of politics.

As such, the term "governmentality" refers to a genealogy of government, not as a theory, but as a perspective—a tool box—from which "one might make intelligible the diversity of attempts by authorities of different sorts to act upon the actions of others in relation to

objectives of national prosperity, harmony, virtue, productivity, social order, discipline, emancipation, self-realization and so forth” (Rose 1998, 29). Governmentality studies would in fact strive to illustrate how our taken-for-granted ways of doing things in politics, and how we think about and question them, are not entirely self-evident or necessary (Dean 1999: p.21). These studies would challenge our common understanding of politics by broadening the base of our interrogation to include questions such as: how do we understand ourselves as subjects governing ourselves and others? What “games of truth”, disciplines, aesthetic, ethical, and epistemic regimes are we cautioning to obey, reproduce, impose or transgress the rules by which we can access ourselves as “political selves”?

To do so, governmentality studies deal with the different strategies and practices of subjectification embedded in what we might term the “conduct of conduct”, that is to say the ways we produce freedom as an experience throughout the management of agency, otherness and collective forms of socialization. In that regard, governmentality studies redirect our attention to the ways in which strategies of “conducting conduct” so frequently operate through shaping what Foucault termed “technologies of the self” *i.e.*, the ways in which individuals and collectives are pressing—and pressing themselves—to understand, judge and conduct themselves. Consequently, the overlaps between “governmentality studies” and “practices of subjectification” (or technologies of the Self) are more than just overlaps: these spheres would literally call each other into consideration. In sum, governmentality studies are not only studies about the different ways in which our understanding of politics have been historically shaped; they offer a new way to analytically reflect on the inter-constitutive relations between concepts such as freedom, power, truth and the self.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>The constitution of the self is explored by Foucault through a “genealogy of subjectification”, which, according to Nikolas Rose, “is a genealogy of what one might term our relation to ourselves” (Rose 1998, p. 24). More precisely, by presupposing that people are the kind of creatures whose ontology is historical, genealogy refers to a form of inquiry looking at intellectual and practical techniques (or technologies) by which we have historically

### 3. From Microphysics of Power to the Problem of Government

The analytics of government contained in Foucault's governmentality studies can be understood as the reframing of the microphysics of power he previously elaborated in his work on disciplines and psychiatric power. The notion of a microphysics of power was first coined by Foucault in his work which cross-examined the rise of disciplines and what he called the psychiatric power to problematize the power of sovereignty. There he claimed that a disciplining version of psychiatry emerged to "defend society" against "dangerous" and potentially "contagious" figures of abnormality that threaten social order (Foucault 2003, 1999). It is through this work that Foucault elaborates a "microphysics of power" which discloses the ways in which power operates through (1) various and disseminated points of application; (2) discursive and non-discursive practices which are engaged in the production of truth; (3) diverse processes of subjectification by which the subject of power becomes a subject of truth for others and for itself (Foucault 1971).<sup>14</sup>

By exploring the disciplinary treatment received by King George III, to give only one example, Foucault is tracking the contours of a disciplinary economy that would operate on

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constituted ourselves. It is less a history of the person than a genealogy of the relations that individuals and peoples have established with themselves; "in which they have come to relate to themselves *as selves*" (Rose 1998, p. 24). Thus, according to Rose:

[...] a genealogy of subjectification focuses directly on the practices [including discourses and narratives as a technology of power] that locate human beings in particular 'regimes of the person.' It does not write a continuous history of the self, but rather accounts for the diversity of language of personhood that have taken shape—character, personality, identity, reputation, honour, citizen, individual, normal [...] and the relation of authority within which these have circulated in legal, domestic, industrial, and other practices for acting upon the conduct of persons.

Such an investigation might proceed along a number of linked pathways (Rose 1998, p. 24)

<sup>14</sup> For Foucault, an analysis of the subjectification practices remains incomplete if one doesn't consider the shaping of what we refer as "the Self" which is, in part, constituted by the internalization of various political objectives through the usage of different technologies of power, including epistemological regimes of truth and discursive practices. For Foucault, what constitutes subjectivity is mediated by what he calls "techniques of the self"—techniques which remain not only historically localisable, but embedded within different "techniques of domination." In short, the "individual-subject" (l'individu-sujet) always emerges at the crossroad of specific "techniques of the self" and "techniques of domination" (Foucault 2001b, p. 507). According to Frederic Gros, l'individu-sujet "est le procès de subjectivation sur des procédures d'assujettissement, selon des doublures, au gré de l'histoire, plus ou moins recouvrantes" (Foucault 2001b, p. 507).

different basis than a regime of sovereignty. One of the main differences between a sovereignty and disciplinary regime would be the focus of its individualisation. In the regime of sovereignty, we would find an asymmetric use of violence and the power to take away from subalterns as coloring the main technologies used by sovereigns to enforce their authority. In such a configuration of power, sovereigns ought to be the most visible entities, using an array of prestigious and exclusive signs to identify and delimitate authorities, while the Multitude is given little or no importance. Within a disciplinary regime, this top-down focus is described by Foucault as being reversed. The task of making the individual within the Multitude increasingly known and visible at all times would suddenly become very important. Under the power of sovereignty, commoners would operate mostly behind a veil of anonymity, only to be exposed and punished when guilty of an offence. In a disciplinary regime, commoners would be increasingly made visible at all times by various disciplinary mechanisms, only to be taken away in discrete facilities in which they disappear from the crowd until re-educated.

This is exactly the transition that Foucault wishes to illustrate with the dramatic case of George III, by which he contrasts two economies of power. Here the power of sovereignty is subordinated to the rise of a new figure whose authority supersedes the Maker of all exception (i.e. the king): the physician and his staff. A medical treatment guided by a precise understanding of what constitute the proper behaviour for a King now rules over the authority of George III. We should notice here that this specific case about the fate of George III does not appeal to the language of Revolutions, social contract or any pre-existing natural rights. Rather, the argument of a sane reason is here evoked by a new emerging economy of power which claims not only to abrogate the power of a King if considered “sick,” but is furthermore confident in its ability to cure the King from his madness. Taken away from his public life, George III is then isolated and gradually disciplined as would be a mere commoner until his

behaviours are judged by the physicians as well-suited for political functions. In other words, even a “deviant” king can be jailed and treated within a disciplinary economy where “normality” and “docility” now prevail over the eccentricities and excesses of sovereignty.

In *Discipline and Punish*, the same methodology is used to track the dynamics of power embedded in the development of a modern society that have systematically shaped “disciplined subjectivities” through different methods of individualization and classification, operating below, so to speak, the legal and judiciary structures of modern sovereignty. Examining the practice of imprisonment as a disciplinary technology, Foucault notices that such a practice is no longer a transient phase prior to execution or mere corporal punishment (through starvation and torture for instance). Prisons are rather portrayed as a more humane, efficient and economical method of re-education capable of breaking down and reconstructing offenders’ personality toward docility, productivity and conformity. Moving away from punctual acts of revenge, the art of punishing became a means of serving the higher purpose of educating the masses and re-educating the antisocial. Rather than the extreme, highly codified, and graphic acts of torture inflicted on the offender’s body, imprisonment would now take hold of the delinquent’s body in a very different way; this by confining it to small and solitary cells where hours of sleep are regulated and intimate and sexual activities prohibited. Following the long experience of Christian monastic practices, solitary confinement is here designed to force upon the offenders an examination of conscience, gradually shaping his or her behaviours as if they are always under examination (here not by the confessor or God Himself, but by the prison’s staff). Gradually, the impression of being constantly under a discrete surveillance is internalized by the incarcerated people. Moments outside solitary confinement are gradually associated with labour, slowly conditioning the offenders to associate moments of “freedom” with sociability, docility, obedience and work.

The *telos* of imprisonment becomes less an act of vengeance than the project of re-educating offenders and curing the disturbed toward being fully rehabilitated individuals; that is individuals who can be re-inserted in a working environment in which no detail will be spared (predominantly factories and workhouses). No longer privileging spectacular forms of punishment, the practice of imprisonment now involves a steady and disciplined force, calling for an equally steady and disciplined response from the offenders.

For Foucault, the modern art of imprisonment reveals in its most concentrated form a disciplinary economy of power which operates pervasively across all aspects of modern societies. Foucault's microphysics of power exposes the work of various disseminated disciplinary technologies and rationalities "from school to prison" by which peoples have been gradually shaped as "obedient workers" (among other things) through technologies which directly target the human body, decomposed and recomposed it in order to maximize productivity, growth, conformity and obedience. Through his analysis, Foucault implicitly revealed the endorsement by most (if not all) modern political rationalities (including socialism and communism) of a disciplinary economy of power working behind the political scene, controlling and shaping extensively the formation of modern subjectivity.<sup>15</sup> In other words, the conclusions reached in *Discipline and Punish* suggest that our freedom—and even the way in which we access our conscience—is the product of various, disseminated and meticulous processes of disciplinarization and normalisation that run through all of our basic social interactions, from school, work place to prison (Foucault 2004a). What we understand as our modern subjectivity is the product of various disciplinary and normalisation processes

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<sup>15</sup> Foucault's point, however, is not to dismiss the views according to which we can understand the various systems of production, the class system and the different institutions they have contributed to generate as power relations, but rather to suggest that reducing power relations to any one kind of explanation or systematic view is to miss the mark on the dynamic, infinitely complex, forever shifting, and creative aspects of power. For Foucault, to assume rationality as an anthropological invariant or the course of history as obeying some economic laws and contradiction is to do exactly this.

which are correlated with the development of various industrial and urban mass-concentrated modes of social organisation geared toward productivity, efficiency and security rationales; modes of organisation that have been gradually internalized through individualised patterns of subjectivity (Rose 1999, pp. 61-97).<sup>16</sup>

Following the publication of *Discipline and Punish*, the belief in a freestanding science by which both neo-Kantian rationalism and the dialectical materialism justify their respective projects was profoundly shaken. By showing how the humanist and progressive project of modernity was consolidated through coercive and disciplinary mechanisms, Foucault did not only show how even a “will to emancipate” can become its exact opposite, but also that the basis of modern positive or so-called freestanding science itself was inextricably intertwined in power formations working at controlling, individualizing, disciplining and making increasingly visible the very subject it claims to make cognizable and free. After *Discipline and Punish*, as Jonathan Simon puts it, “the question of whether a true social science was possible had to be recognized as a fundamentally political question” (Simon 1996).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Following Foucault’s critique, it seems that we must assume, like numerous cultural studies already do, that the relations of subjectification are constructed and historical. Yet the main difference between genealogy of subjectification and cultural studies is that genealogy shifts the focus from the domain of culture to a problematisation of government. Usually, cultural studies analyse change in human behaviour as a result of what they claim to be a more foundational historical matrix which is often located below the state of consciousness of the actors within a given culture (i.e. the transformation of the mode of production, the passage from a mechanistic to an organic form of solidarity or the modification of family structures). But, as Rose demonstrates, it seems that the ways in which humans give meaning to experience also have a history. These devices of “meaning production”, “grids of visualisation”, vocabularies, norms, laws, and systems of judgement *produce* experience; they are not themselves *produced* by experience, unless we suppose that “experience” is a Subject or an independent consciousness that drives human understanding along a linear and predestined pathway (Rose 1998, p. 25). Here, a genealogy of subjectification practices presuppose that our relation to ourselves is constructed the way it is because it has been the object of a whole variety of more or less rationalized schemes or precepts of governance, “which have sought to shape our ways of understanding and enacting our existences as human beings in the named of certain objectives—manliness, femininity, honour, modesty, propriety, civility, discipline” and so on.

<sup>17</sup> Simon, Jonathan. 1996. “*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Middle-Range Research Strategy*,” *Contemporary Sociology* 25, no. 3: 318. Quoted in Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt. (eds.) 1999. *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, p. 28, note 9.

Such pervasive critique explains why Foucault's microphysics of power became rapidly the source of a mounting discomfort, especially among the (at the time) influential Marxist French circles.<sup>18</sup> It did not take long for accusations to be formulated against Foucault's project, not only by exponents of Marxism, but also by those who believed that conflating the inheritance of the Enlightenment and the constitution of a repressive disciplinary society goes much too far. The perpetual re-contextualization of power which aims at tracking its inflexions was first accused of neglecting the macro dimension of power by which larger configurations of power could be effectively addressed (such as the state, the international mechanisms of capitalism and so on). Examining *how* power operates rather than *what* power is did not necessarily provide an explanation about *why* power operates or endures in this or that way, or what we should do about it. In other words, the capacity to offer a broad solution to long-lasting structural injustice, and even the teleological aspect of resistance, was criticized as being lost in Foucault's micro analysis.

As I have argued elsewhere, these two critiques can be dismissed by a careful reading of Foucault's work (Malette 2009). As Foucault himself emphasises, each level of analysis calls the other into consideration (Foucault 1997, p. 132). His microphysics of power, as Foucault himself argues, is not a matter of size, but rather of depth (Foucault 2004e). To be sure, Foucault's genealogical methodology definitely puts him at odds with the dialectical\historical materialism of Marxism, which basically establishes in stone the rules of the game to play and the correct pathway toward emancipation (Darier 1999). Foucault's methodology, on the contrary, assumes that there are neither definitive rules framing the games of power we find ourselves in, nor any grand or universal narrative that can be applied to all situations of

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<sup>18</sup> A similar "discomfort" was previously felt by French epistemologists following the publication of the *Order of Things* in 1966, who pressed Foucault to clarify his archaeological methodology, which he did with the publication of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*; a methodology already gesturing toward what will be described as Foucault's genealogical shift. See Foucault, M. 2001r. Sur l'archéologie des sciences humaines. Réponse au Cercle d'épistémologie. In Foucault, M. 2001. *Dit et Écrits* Volume 1.

power. As Foucault puts it in *Discipline and Punish*, “our present arises as much out of these moments of critique as out of some relentless logic of regulation” (Rose 1999, p. 278). And for Foucault, Marxism was exactly that: a moment of critique, which, following the Soviet experience, clearly became an all-encompassing logic of regulation (Foucault 2004e, p. 94; Foucault 2001, p. 857). For Foucault, only a contextualised analysis of power possesses the advantage of tracking shifts of power in their context, thus revealing the ever-transforming effects of power where they emerge without being seduced or excessively shaped by one of its manifestations.

Such contextualized analysis does not sacrifice the macro level for Foucault. Foucault’s work on psychiatric power and the rise of disciplines clearly illustrates that the micro level does not exclude the macro. It is indeed by examining the modern and so-called humanist methods of punishment at a *micro* level that Foucault was able to reveal the contours of a “disciplinary society” operating at a *macro* level: a society obsessed by defending itself against abnormality, criminality and disorder through the formation of various disciplinary methods and apparatuses, forensic medicine and other methods of intervention intertwined with increasing policing activities knotted with eugenic and economic considerations (Foucault 2004a; 1999). The intertwined dimensions of the micro and macro level of analysis can also be appreciated in Foucault’s investigation of nationalist and war-oriented discourses converging with medical-eugenics and the constitution of national forms of racism, through which Foucault reframes the modern notion of sovereignty as a project to defend outwardly “society” through the structures of a relatively unified configuration of governance called “biopolitics.”

In his examination of biopolitics, Foucault unpacks the various processes by which sovereign power has been gradually governmentalized, becoming this totalizing and individualizing regime of government outside of which life itself has become unsustainable, impossible and even unthinkable: a regime of government which has secured the resisting abilities of its subjects by framing their desires in terms that may be taken care of by an accountable and responsible “government” (Foucault 2004d, 2004e). Biopolitics is here described by Foucault as an emerging mode of management in which individuals are perceived not only as single elements of a working force needing to be disciplined toward maximum productivity and docility, but also as part of a living and larger organism (the “population”) that gradually reveals some natural regularities through statistical investigations which gave grip to new forms of political technology and rationalities of government (Foucault 2004d, 2004e). Although the power of sovereignty and disciplines are still depicted as playing a crucial role in outlining the processes of subjectification shaping the modern subject, Foucault is suggesting that they constitute only one side of the equation. Foucault is suggesting that the emergence of individuals who refer to themselves as “free individual beings” would not be so much the correlate of some greater and ongoing forms of disciplinary processes but rather be the correlate of various security and normalizing mechanisms which use “freedom” as a political technology to govern populations.

But perhaps more importantly, the exploration of the notion of “biopolitics” leads Foucault to assert that one institution has grown influential and more powerful than any other. This institution is the state. Indeed, the state rapidly imposed itself as the only institution capable of relaying all the other disciplinary and normalizing sites of power by gathering and organizing the information and capacities they generated in order to create a more totalizing pattern of governance and penetrating mode of subjectification, namely an institutionalized and

centralizing form of government in charge of the wellbeing of a national population within the established limits of the jurisdictional and sovereign state.<sup>19</sup>

Although it may seem paradoxical to study the disseminated strategies and techniques of power to finally come full circle to the state, there is no paradox for Foucault in bringing the state under the scrutiny of his “microphysics of power”. On the contrary, by problematizing the state as a contingent technology of power within the larger “problem of government,” Foucault integrates and repositions his previous studies on sovereignty, discipline and biopolitics. Far from abandoning his microphysics of power, Foucault’s investigation of the state became this vast genealogical study of the various rationalities and technologies that have contributed to generate the state as this mode of governance and subjectivation distinct from the tradition of sovereignty and disciplines (Foucault 2004e, 2001).

#### 4. The Problem of Government: City-Citizen Games and Pastoral Power

By investigating how the state has been historically and contingently assembled, Foucault unpacks what he called the “problem of government” through various sites of technologies and rationalities at the source of this idea that a ruler, then a government, has to guide, protect and care for each and every member of his flock (Foucault 2004e). For Foucault, the modern “problem of government” bears the influence of two main configurations of power inherited from the Ancient techniques of government, which are still present in the problem of the welfare state and its subsequent critiques: the notion of a pastoral care and the Greco-Roman ideal of city-citizenship.<sup>20</sup> As a specific “conduct of conducts”, pastoral power differs from

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<sup>19</sup> But for Foucault, as Nikolas Rose reminds us, the power of the state is not the cause, but the resultant or an outcome “of the composition and assembling of actors, flows, buildings, relations of authority into relatively durable associations mobilized, to a greater or lesser extent, towards the achievement of particular objectives by common means” (Rose 1996, p. 43). See also Foucault 2004e, p. 79.

<sup>20</sup> On the different formulations of the terms “government” by Foucault, ranging from a “conduct to conducts”, to the decisional organ attributed to the head of the modern state, to the larger framework of inter-subjective

the “city-citizen” game inherited from the Greek model of the *polis*.<sup>21</sup> For the Greeks, politics characterises a self-governing community of free and equal citizens (at least allegedly in Athens under Pericles) and entails the making of laws and other common decision making for the common good of the community (the *polis*). The pastoral power, in contrast, concerns a community based on a relationship between God, the pastor (his representative), and the pastorate (the Christian community). It is characterised by the constitution of a flock gathered by a good shepherd, using promises of care and salvation for each and all by means of individualizing kindness and the instauration of a detailed knowledge of the flock as a whole and in detail (Dean 1999; Foucault 2004e, pp. 131-133). In sum, the contrast would be “between a legal and political subject with rights and obligations, encapsulated in the notion of citizen, and the living individual who is the target of pastoral power, a being who is both obedient and helpful” (Dean 1999, p. 76).

For Foucault, the shift from the city-citizen game to pastoral power had profound impact on the “techniques of the self” and practices of subjectification. With Christianity, the arts of examining one’s consciousness and desires are no longer geared toward mastering oneself in order to achieve a state of “ataraxia”, spiritual serenity or communion with the greater forces of the Cosmos (as with the Stoics and Epicureans). The goal of examining one’s consciousness (or soul) is rather geared toward acknowledging the presence of Adam’s fault (congenital pride and rebellion) and the perpetual need to confess the impurity of one’s secret desires, the relentless presence of Satan in one’s consciousness, and the subsequent necessity of abandoning all projects of self-mastering to achieve a complete surrender to God’s will

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relations (and/or self-relations) which involve the notion of mastery and obedience through the adoption of transformative truths and subjectification practices, see Foucault 2001n.

<sup>21</sup> Although the image of a shepherd as caretaker of humans can be found in Greek culture, Foucault argues that such image refers mostly to the “Golden Age” when the politics was of no use for divinity itself was ruling over all things. Plato refutes explicitly the image of a shepherd when it comes to politics, endorsing instead the metaphor of weaving (Foucault 2004e, pp. 139-165).

through various practices of public penitence, abnegation, mortification and submission ordered by the confessor and pastor (Foucault 2004e, pp. 173-174). In other words, the pastoral techniques of the self would be geared toward the annihilation of one's will in order to embrace God's redemption offered through the sacrifice of His one and only son, Jesus Christ.<sup>22</sup> As such, no longer are these spiritual practices reserved to elite groups of citizens. Practices of confession, prayer, penitence and obedience would now be accessible to all, especially to the poor and the ostracised of the Roman Empire. By the promotion of a cult open to all (including women, slaves and second-class citizens) Christianity moves beyond the segregation attached to the different ranks of Roman citizenship; it is able to overcome the old-civic culture dominated by patrician families while integrating many elements of the old Roman civic model to generate a universalizing and cosmopolitan system of governance, not only inclusive of all Roman citizens, but of all peoples on Earth.

##### 5. From Pastorate of the Soul to Pastorate of *Homo Economicus*

The notions of "city-citizens game" and pastoral power open up deep roots of our mentalities of government (Dean 1999). Both economies of power can be understood as transversal to the different regimes of government from late Antiquity to modernity, where they can be appreciated in the form of the welfare state as this tricky adjustment "between political power exercised over legal-political subjects and pastoral power exercised over live individuals" (Dean 1999, p. 76). For Foucault, the modern problem of government which is embodied through the series of the state of police, the welfare state, and the subsequent liberal critiques can be understood as the product of this irreducible tension opposing this idea of a self-

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<sup>22</sup> See Foucault (2004e, p. 191, note 33) for the description of the obedience trainings enforced by various Christian monastic orders, including the Benedictines who follow the Rule of St-Benedict, or the Jesuits following the Rule 13 of Ignatius' Rules for "Thinking with the Church," ordering that: "I will believe that the white that I see is black if the hierarchical Church so defines it.". The early Christianity pastorate provides us with an image of the exercise of power, confessional subjectification practices that is in many ways continuous with certain of our present forms of expertise and activities, ranging from volunteering, the psy disciplines, to social work (Dean 1999, p. 75). See Rose 1989; 1995.

governing community constituted of free and equal citizens, and the idea of a community made of living individuals endowed with natural regularities (and inequalities) a government must normalize, protect and enhance.

More than just a starting point for the modern problem of government, however, the tension between pastoral power and “city-citizen games” allows Foucault to track the various ways in which freedom has emerged in relation to governmental practices without the recourse to any externalities or metaphysical explanation as to why humans are free. The tension between the pastoral and the city-citizen games is not so much depicted as this ultimate point of origin of a unified Western governmentality that would unfold before us; such tension is rather explored by Foucault to illustrate a series of immanent reversals, fissuring from within, so to speak, the limits imposed by these economies of power. To be clear, the tension between the “city-citizen game” and pastoral power allows Foucault to better illustrate the various “counter-practices” and “practices of freedom” as resulting from immanent innovations and reversals. Even within a totalizing and individualizing configuration of power such as the pastoral power, the emergence of internal resistances, innovations, reversals and practices of freedom illustrate that they cannot be controlled. Foucault made this point salient by illustrating how different tactics and strategies, such as emphasizing the return of Christ (the Apocalypse), retiring from the world in solitary confinement, mystical experiences (claimed to be above any rational understanding), the project of making the Holy Scripture accessible to all (in vernacular languages), and the contestation of the Papacy as representing God on Earth, produced different points of contestation and resistance leading eventually to the fragmentation of Christianity, precipitating a series of events such as the Reform, Counter-Reform, the progressive emergence of the Raison d'état, the modern welfare state, and the

gradual formation of the liberal mode of governance toward an “economic pastorate” (Gordon 1991, p. 12).

In other words, Foucault’s work on governmentality demonstrates that these reversals and innovations emerge without the need of any externalities or metaphysical explanations for human freedom. The transformation we witness within the historical successions of our concepts of knowledge or our understanding of freedom would be immanent in the counter-practices emerging within the interstices of open structures we could call *episteme* (configurations of knowledge or “games of truth”) enmeshed with various political regimes. Even what we regard as the modern discipline of “political science” would be intimately tied to these immanent reversals and innovations mapped by Foucault. The modern discipline of political science would work actively at producing experts habilitated to speak the “truth” about the political, to connect the dots between the knowledge offered by a variety of sources of information in order to offer the know-how that “promise[s] to render docile the unruly domains over which government is to be exercised, to make government possible and to make government better” (Rose 1996, p. 45). Modern political science would be part of a constellation of new modes of knowledge gradually produced through the emancipation of the political sphere from its onto-theological tutelage (politics becomes a subject in its own right), the development of a positive human science made possible via disseminated disciplinary practices across early modern society (double-entry book keeping, compulsory medical inspection, school grade, and so on), and the rise of statistical models, the use of diagrams and various social theories, all working to connect the subjective conditions necessary to govern a nation made of “civilized” citizens (disciplined) and to render intelligible the domains whose laws a responsible government must know and respect (Rose 1996, p. 44).

The emancipation of politics from its onto-theological tutelage has been historically associated with the rise of the police state and *Raison d'état*: a position which held that politics should be managed according to its own set of priorities, namely the stability, the conservation and the enhancement of the state's powers in order to increase its prosperity and influence (Machiavelli, Botero, Palazzo, etc.) (Foucault 2004e, pp.261-293). *Raison d'état*, understood as this philosophical position ultimately arguing for the separation of political affairs and religious institutions, is described by Foucault as the offspring of the fragmentation of the "shepherd-flock" games (the pastoral power) through the emergence of various Christian "counter-conducts" (i.e. the emergence of different religious practices, the rise of rivalries between monastic orders, disputes over Christian centers of power, theological disagreements leading to the Reformation and Counter-Reformation). As such, the fragmentation of Christendom played a significant role in the emergence of a science which assumes that politics must be studied for its own sake, according to a new geopolitical reality made of discrete states competing for power. As Mitchell Dean summarizes it:

In the sixteenth centuries, reason of state is used to think about how states can be managed in a positive manner according to principles that are intrinsic to them, even if these principles must be balanced against the virtues of justice. Reason of state marks the abandonment of a belief in the unification of all kingdoms in one final empire prior to the Second Coming, or of the project of the reconstitution of the Roman Empire [...] From now on, politics must recognize the plurality of competing states with different histories. States are historically limited entities (Dean 1999, p. 87).

In other words, the Prince's business would no longer be to imitate the City of God, but rather to enhance and make more powerful the City on Earth, even at the cost of using deceptive strategies or trespassing the law in order to re-establish it.<sup>23</sup> Contrary to the Christian political

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<sup>23</sup>A political principle which even Aquinas acknowledges through the adage: *necessitas legem non habet* (Burns 1997, pp.439-441). For more precision on the princely art of politics at the Renaissance, see the chapter 5 of

tradition, which conceived sovereignty mainly through the paradigm of God's government of Nature and recommended the adoption of theological virtues to rulers (fear of God, the pursuit of mercifulness, justice and truth), the Raison d'état is to be conceived by reason alone, and geared toward goals that are immanent to its object of rule. As such, the Raison d'état reshaped profoundly the medieval notion of sovereignty, described by Foucault as this logic which relied "on technologies of subtraction levied on its subject", whether they were goods, time and ultimately life itself (Dean 1999, p.105). The duty of Raison d'état is now to *produce* and *sustain* the life and wellbeing of the subjects it governs, leaving as a secondary matter the (anti)Machiavellian disputes on how a prince ought to secure his position, or the jurisdictional quarrels about the justification of sovereignty. The art of governing now depends on concrete know-how, knowledge by which can be captured every detail, situation, transaction and human behaviour, not the inputs of some abstract theories. The Raison d'état reshapes *en profondeur* the notion of political rule by endowing an extra degree of legitimacy—but also of responsibility and accountability—to sovereign powers in that they must take care and enhance *concretely* the productivity and wellbeing of what constitutes their main capital, namely the peoples and resources their territory encompasses: a task that requires new modes of knowledge and intervention.

Although we can certainly see a degree of continuity between pastoral power and Raison d'état when it comes to the intensification of care now applied by the Raison d'état to the task of governing and protecting a flock of human subjects<sup>24</sup>; and although we can notice a resemblance between the totalizing and individuating control exercised by pastoral power and the different security and managerial apparatus reshaped by the state of police shaped by the

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volume 1: "The age of princes" in Quentin Skinner's work *The Foundations of modern political thought* for more details (Skinner 1978).

<sup>24</sup> Certainly not at the scale of humanity as Christianity envisions its flock to be, but certainly at the scale of a national population.

Raison d'état<sup>25</sup>, the most significant difference between the two resides with the notion of a governmental pastorate that does not need any externalities, grand metaphysical or religious justifications beside the wellbeing of this concrete and earthly-based entity: the state and its population. In short, speculative theological or cosmological inputs are no longer required to govern. The purpose of the government is now conceived in terms of reinforcing the state from the competition of other states and its internal weaknesses, which, in turn, presupposes the development of a certain type of knowledge, which also operates without any the need of any externalities, namely: the art of political science helped by the science of arithmetic and statistics (Dean 1999, p. 86).

Through a “statistical science” of management capable of predicting what was believed to be purely accidental (death, sickness, criminal and birth rates for example), the science of politics rapidly shifted from the activity of studying historical examples of political *virtu*, to empirical and mathematical assessments oriented toward policing and aligning the wellbeing of the state with the wellbeing of individuals which constitute its population (Foucault 2004e, pp.119-139).<sup>26</sup> It was through the inputs of a science of number and prediction that political authorities were gradually able to build more precise modes of interventions that did not require the recourse of either religious authorities, the prestige of nobility, or the arguments of political theories to justify the exercise of power (Dean 1999, p. 103-104. See also Porter

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<sup>25</sup> A control augmented via the increasing disciplinarization and bureaucratization connecting together the disseminated institutions and practices which shape in an ever-greater details the behaviours of its citizens (the constitution of the police state).

<sup>26</sup> As Mitchell Dean reminds us, François Ewald (1990) illustrates that the law has been displaced by the elaboration of norms, which “*is a way for a group to provide itself—or to be provided with—a common denominator without any recourse to a point of externality*”; this along with the elaboration of a fictive entity (the average man) used as a statistical mirror by which society believes it contemplates its own objective image. But perhaps more disturbing is the fact that “if we consider the technical norm, argues Ewald, normalization is less concerned with establishing a model than with reaching an understanding regarding the choice of a model. The essential question is not the production of objects that can act as a standard but the establishment of procedures that will lead to general agreement regarding the choice of norms and standards. In discourses of technical standardization all norms of terminology, or special measurement and of quality of interdependent, and this interdependence arises from the fact that *what is normalized is not the world of things but language itself* [...] Normalization, for Ewald’s analysis of industrial standardization, ‘is the institution of the perfect common language of pure communication required by industrial society’” (Dean 1999, p. 110). The emphasis is mine.

1995). What is rather required from a “responsible” government is an exact knowledge of the inherent properties of its object of governance in order to maximize its wealth, productivity and health. As Dean puts it:

In order to attain some effective autonomy from sovereignty, the art of government must discover its own instruments and ways of reasoning that are distinct from patriarchalist models of the household and family, and do not simply entail the imposition of laws and use of subtractive mechanism. In other words, it must find models that do not ultimately return to the rule of sovereignty (Dean 1999, p. 107).

This “way of reasoning” was made possible through the political discovery of the notion of population which provided the key to overcome the too narrow model provided by the family, and the too large and abstract model based on sovereignty.<sup>27</sup> The “discovery” of the notion of “population” as a positive body via the political technology of statistical calculus is depicted by Foucault as the determinant factor which allowed economic rationalities to shift from the realm of the family to the Political, thus creating a new science of government: “political economy.” It is through the political discovery of the notion of population that the power of sovereignty was progressively reframed by new governing and administrative obligations, not only geared toward maximizing the power of the state in a post-Westphalian context, but also toward maximizing the wellbeing of population with the extra challenge of regulating *correctly* the freedom of its living-subjects\citizens. In sum, Foucault’s notion of governmentality reveals how the notion of a pastoral care applied to the secular task of enhancing and protecting national population has produced a “rationality of government” which profoundly reshaped the jurisdictional mechanisms of sovereignty, subsuming them under the regulative and normalizing task of managing and enhancing living, working and consuming human subjects. As a result, the modern problem of government soon became the

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<sup>27</sup> The family is no longer perceived as an *apriori* of the Political (as for Aristotle), but rather an object of this new art of government targeting family as sub-entities of population to normalize (Dean 1999, p. 108).

one of adjusting the level of intervention and *freedom* needed for the natural properties of the subjects of its governance to manifest themselves: what will gradually become the liberal arts of government through various critiques of the state of police and the Raison d'état.

## 6. Liberalism as a Way of Governing

According to Raymond Geuss, liberalism is a phenomenon that emerges in reaction to some particular historical events and social tendencies (Absolutism, cameralism, theocracy, etc.). More precisely, liberalism as a political doctrine stands against “absolutising” accidental existing habits of thought, or against what he calls the adoption of a “pure normative standpoint” (Geuss 2002, p. 330). It is the reverse tendency of that political willingness deployed in the police state to govern all the little details and every economic aspect of the citizens' ways of life.

The notions of population, statistics, security and political economy are intimately related in Foucault's analysis of liberalism. As Burchell reminds us: “Liberalism begin, Foucault says, with the recognition of the heterogeneity of the principle regulating the non-totalizable multiplicity of economic subjects of interest and those operating in the totalizing unity of legal-political sovereignty” (Burchell 1991, p. 137). For Foucault, liberalism is a mode of governing which results not so much from the dissemination of new ideas of freedom, self-government and democratization since (at least) the Italian Renaissance, but rather the correlate of a governing mode self-limiting the scope of its own interventions on a “civil society” deemed to be endowed with a self-generating order, combined with this idea that

perpetual peace does not rest so much on the capacity of states to self-limit one another, but on the limitless and free access of the market to the world.<sup>28</sup> As Mitchell Dean puts it:

Liberalism is a particular form of articulation of the ‘shepherd-flock game’ and the ‘city-citizen’ game, of pastoral power that takes the form of a bio-politics of the administration of life and a form of sovereignty that deploys the law and rights to limit, to offer guarantees, to make safe and, above all, to legitimate and justify the operations of bio-political programmes and disciplinary practices (Dean 1999, p. 132).

According to Foucault, the operations of bio-political programmes are made possible through the political discovery of the “population” viewed as this positive entity (i.e. “body-specie”) endowed with elements of predictability made accessible through statistics and various census practices. These elements of predictability highlight features that are deemed to be immanent in the population itself. Through the acquisition of such knowledge, the liberal art of government, like its predecessor *Raison d’état*, gradually emancipated itself from having to justify interventions through classical notions of sovereignty, either invested in the Prince, God, or in the People (Dean 1999, p. 104). Although these notions can still be found in both *Raison d’état* and liberalism, both economies of power now operate predominantly upon a knowledge believed to be immanent in its object of rule, and only secondarily upon theories of sovereignty which assert their validity either through God’s providence or some variations of the social contract. The main difference between *Raison d’état* and the liberal governmentality resides with the abandonment by the latter of the project of making every little detail of citizens’ life subject of political control. Liberal governmentality favours the view that population is endowed not only with immanent, but also with natural and pre-political properties a government must both protect and restrict itself from interfering with. This knowledge, also deemed to be metaphysically free from the recourse to any externalities,

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<sup>28</sup> For an account on the ideal of freedom in Italian Renaissance, see chapter 1 “The ideal of liberty” in Skinner, Q. [1978] 2006. *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought. Volume 1: The Renaissance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

has, in turn, encouraged (1) the conception of an “economy” as a self-regulating system largely coincident with the boundaries of that population described in term of “civil society”; and (2) the subsequent need for an economic government to minimally supervise “at a distance” this self-regulating system (a “distance” mainly institutionalised through the principle of “representative government”).

As such, liberal governmentality has produced “rationalities of government” (rather than “political rationalities”) that not only act as modes of regulation, but also serve as modes of contestation, thus making the sovereign power accountable for the wellbeing of the population, favouring by the same token the “democratization” of modern politics through a renewed “economic pastorate” (Gordon 1991).<sup>29</sup> The emergence of a biopolitics emphasizing the natural and pre-political condition of its object surely gave the sovereign power a new range of possible interventions over the population.<sup>30</sup> But it also opens new grounds for resisting strategies affecting the members of the population, who are now in a position to hold accountable the government for their wellbeing and happiness; thus pseudo-democratic arguments can be exchanged from both sides of the fence. As Graham Burchell puts it:

To the extent that the objective of government is to provide the regulatory framework which will secure the more or less automatic functioning of civil society, the state’s exercise of governmental power can be seen as in continuity with, or as grafted on to, society’s immanent relations of power.

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<sup>29</sup> The term “economic pastorate” is from Colin Gordon in one of perhaps the best papers done on Foucault’s political work: “police government, finally, is in Foucault’s terms a form of pastoral power, a government which defines itself as being ‘of all and of each’: a universal assignation of subjects to an oeconomy, through its way of equating the happiness of its individual subjects with the state’s strength. Police is therefore a kind of *economic pastorate* [...]” (1991, p. 12).

<sup>30</sup> It is in the name of society, Burchell suggests, that “the state’s intervention in particular areas of life are brought under critical scrutiny in term of both their legitimacy (do they encroach on the *necessary* freedom of individuals?) *and* the competence and cost-effectiveness of its methods (can the objectives be achieved without state intervention: that is, by member of society themselves?). It is in the name of society and of the capacity of its members to ‘manage their own affairs’ that government is both demanded and criticized. Government is demanded as a function of the security and order necessary for society’s continued existence and for its capacity to develop according to its intrinsic, natural dynamics. But the state’s competence and entitlement to govern is at the same time placed under strict critical supervision in the name of this same society” (Burchell 1991, p. 143)

It is in the name of society and its economic processes, in the name of their specific naturalness and immanent mechanisms of ‘self-government’ or self-regulation, that government by the state is both criticized and, so to speak, demanded (Burchell 1991, p. 140).

To put it otherwise, it appears that the Machiavellian disjunction between the prince and his principality which consecrated the autonomy of politics versus theology or any other external *telos*, allowed such a notion of immanence to be transferred to the boundaries of a new independent reality, conceived here as forming a “natural” and “pre-political” entity that must be protected not only against the tyrannical abuses of sovereigns, but also from their ignorance in the matter of political economy.<sup>31</sup> In other words, from the task of giving pragmatic advice to princes on how to stay in power to the emergence of political economy, the main problem soon became one of security: not of securing one’s position and legitimacy to power, but rather of securing these “non-political processes” from political abuses in order to harmonize and secure the *concrete* needs of a population threatened by an ontological state of scarcity.<sup>32</sup> Liberalism as a mode of governing thus culminated with the materialisation of a “civil society” conceived both as a “natural reality” (producing its immanent set of rules) and a “political artefact” that must be sustained and taken care of by government practices (Barry et al. 1996, pp. 65-81). Preoccupied with maximizing individual liberties understood as forming the core of this “civil society” in both its political and economic manifestations; liberalism galvanises the opposition between the private and public sphere as that which delimits these “natural liberties” which must be secured against despotic interventions from political powers. As Burchell formulates it:

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<sup>31</sup> As Mitchell Dean summarizes it: “[...] with the emergence of the concept of population, with the discovery of the economy as an independent reality and practical domain of government, with the formation of society as the quasi-naturalistic totality beyond the reaches of the government and encompassing it, these polities pass the threshold in which the government of the numbers and the households of the state will henceforth be modified, if not entirely displaced, by a government through economic, social, psychological and biological processes” (Dean 1999, p. 111).

<sup>32</sup> As Graham Burchell observes it: “It [the liberal principle of security-liberty] does not identify governmental reason with the rationality of the sovereign who, in turn, identifies himself or herself with the state. Rather, it finds the principle for limiting and rationalizing the exercise of political power in the operation of the freedom and rationality of those who are governed” (Burchell 1991, p. 139)

At the end of the eighteenth century, the terms liberty and security have become almost synonymous. At the heart of the processes whose self-regulation government must secure is the individual, the essential atomic element of its mechanics, whose freedom to pursue his or her private interests is absolutely necessary to those processes. Liberty is thus a *technical* requirement of governing the natural processes of social life and, particularly, those of self-interest exchanges. [...] The government of interests must be government of a ‘system of natural liberty’. Liberty is not merely determined negatively as what is not prohibited by law or by reference to imprescriptible natural rights. It is positively required as the necessary correlate and instrument of a government whose task is to secure the optimal functioning of natural processes: liberalism requires a proper use of liberty (Burchell 1991, p. 139).

To be clear, the balance between governing too much and too little must always be restored to safeguard the natural, individual and pre-political rights of citizens understood by liberalism as these basic features of human life, coupled with the individual right to pursue happiness as long as it does not infringe on other’s right to do so. It is as such that liberalism combines an individualizing yet democratic ideal of citizenship (“city-citizen” games), shaped through an “economic pastorate” within which the main regulative device of free marketing can tackle the problem of pauperism, while increasing the margin of individual freedom and ensuring social order.<sup>33</sup>

This is not to suggest that liberalism as a way of governing emerged without any reversal of its own. Following the analysis of Foucault, at least two distinct phases in liberal governmentality can be identified. The first one describes early forms of liberalism that can be summarized as attempts to equate the natural and pre-political tendencies of civil society with the state’s overall wealth and power (early forms of liberalism). The second one, associated

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<sup>33</sup> Liberalism is a mode of government which is mostly preoccupied with the adverse effects of *abnormal* poverty (i.e. pauperism), such as the spread of criminality, epidemical diseases, and overpopulation, not the eradication of poverty *per se*. Indeed, as Mitchell Dean reminds us, in the perspective of a liberal governmental economy, “there was to be a certain normalization and inclusion of poverty, as witnessed by Patrick Colquhoun’s famous statement that ‘without a large proportion of poverty, there could be no riches, since riches are the offspring of labour, while labour can only result from a state of poverty...Poverty is therefore the most necessary component of society without which nations and communities could not exist in a state of civilization’” (Dean, 1999: p. 126).

with the German Ordoliberal School and the neo-liberal school of Chicago, is described as differing from the former by its attempt to replace the naturalism at the heart of earlier forms of liberalism by a certain kind of constructivism. After the Second World War, haunted by the danger of totalitarianism, the task of the neo-liberal state was to actively *create* the condition for entrepreneurial and competitive practices to emerge and diffuse themselves as widely as possible within societies that ought to be interconnected and interdependent through free marketing and open competition. Society, from that perspective, is perceived as nothing but a governmental construction, a fiction, which must give way to what is understood as a more efficient way to rule a society with as little centralization, costly bureaucracy, and interventions from government as possible in the lives of peoples. The governmentalizing rationalities thus enter a second phase in becoming managerial and entrepreneurial rationalities that emphasize the competitiveness, the responsabilization and the empowerment of individuals and the capacity of privately owned services to deliver the services usually provided by government.

For exponents of advanced forms of liberalism, too much governmental planning of the economy is to be avoided—not only because of its ineffectiveness, but also for its consequence for individual freedom (Hindess 1987, p. 128). As the Friedmans argue in *Free to Choose*, freedom and prosperity can only be found in a society where the “free market” is predominant (Friedman 1980). In a market society, understood as allowing widespread cooperation without central direction, the “free price mechanism” would be the best way to assure social cohesion while maintaining an individual's freedom. The “Free market price mechanism” not only provides the information about what goods and services are available, it also promotes efficiency following the law of the supply and demand. More importantly, it distributes incomes while allowing employees who feel abused to resign and find another job

(Hindess 1987, p. 123). In such a context, freedom means that an individual cannot be subject to coercion by the arbitrary will of another or of others. Freedom is understood as a “natural characteristic” of both the individuals and the economic exchanges they reciprocate: a freedom not only existentially prior to politics, but a freedom that should be explicitly protected from the grip of politics and interventionism.

### 7. Techniques of the Self in Liberal *Episteme*

As an art of government, liberalism entails the development of specific forms of knowledge, technologies of power and processes of subjectification. From Early to advanced forms of liberalism, these processes run through an emerging conception of the individual as a positive center of “natural interest” that various political mechanisms have to protect and enhance in order to let a self-generating and self-regulating mode of governance emerge. As Burchell convincingly demonstrates, the work of Hume, Ferguson and Adam Smith all illustrate the penetration of this new understanding of individuals (and populations) based on empirical considerations (desires, interests, repulsions), experimentations and technologies (the use of statistics) which became the bedrock of liberal governmentality (Burchell 1991, p. 132). As Rose emphasises, liberalism incarnates a certain way of codifying and delimiting the exercise of sovereign power “by identifying a realm of society, with its own economic processes and its own principle of cohesion, and populated by individual actions according to certain principles of interest” (Rose 1999, p. 53).

In its “advanced form”, liberalism appears as a “way of ruling” intrinsically bound to a *calculating* rationality made available by the conjunction of various micro institutional practices disseminated through society: a rationality which makes it possible to “rule at a distance” through the increasing use of “norms” to enforce political decisions toward goals

such as increasing productivity, efficiency, and the capacity for management in order to establish “the conditions under which the laws of supply and demand can make themselves real, to implant the ways of calculating and managing that will make economic actors think, reckon and behave as competitive, profit-seeking agents” (Rose 1999, pp. 53-65). Although liberalism cannot be reduced to the “privatisation” of the individual as “the nascent capitalist economy or as the expression of an anticipatory ideology of bourgeois society” (Burchell 1991, p. 122), it would be misleading to simply overlook the intertwined emergence of capitalist modes of exchange and liberal governmentality. It would be misleading, I argue, because the “free and capitalist market” absolutely depends upon a specific mode economic life—a specific set of subjectification processes to be more precise—grounded in a particular understanding of freedom—that of production and consumption—where the power to take a decision for oneself or for others has been overwhelmingly taken over by various rationalities and modes of government; “worked and established not by politicians, but by salesmen, market researchers, designers and advertisers who increasingly based their calculation upon psychological conceptions of humans and their desires” (Rose 1999; see also Burchell 1998). Only liberalism as a mode of governance, as a matrix of subjectification and truth, can produce that mode of subjectivity which is required by capitalism.

From freedom as an ideal to freedom as a mode of regulation, liberal processes of subjectification seek to produce self-disciplined workers “who will freely strive to give of their best in the workplace”; it seeks to transform “unfree” people into consumers who will actualize their “freedom” as free-consumers and buyers; it seeks to elevate all those unfit for the exercise of freedom (children, the women, the colonized, the mad) through a rhetoric of progress, civility and responsible freedom, aiming at “conducting conduct” from a state of dependency to freedom. Independence is indeed vital for recoding the genuine desires of

peoples (and consumers) upon which government (and industries) can adjust their next strategies. Freedom produces not only happier human beings, but also more docile and predictable ones. According to Mitchell Dean (1999) and Mariana Valverde (1996), liberal governmentality goes as far as using notions such as freedom, social usefulness and improvement to justify the use of illiberal practices and exclusions, such as eugenic practices (such as forced sterilization), colonialism, cultural domination and genocide (over cultures deemed “primitive”), discrimination and exclusion from political participation (women, prisoners, children, mental ill).

John Stuart Mill is singled out by Valverde as a major proponent of illiberal measures when it comes to colonial practices, that is for those whom the “doctrine of liberty” excludes *de facto*, such as children, minors and “barbarians” (which includes the Aboriginal, African, Indian, Chinese, French Canadians, and so forth). For such people, a despotic form of government is allowed and even required, provided that the end is their *improvement*. Valverde identifies a form of despotism at the heart of liberal governmentality “prior to any division of those capable of bearing the freedom and responsibilities of mature subjectivities and those who are not” (Dean 1999, p. 133). Liberalism is thus perfectly compatible with various forms of despotism; in fact, “liberalism always contains the possibility of non-liberal intervention into the lives of those who do not possess the attribute required to play the city-citizen game” (Dean 1999, p. 138). In return, those rejected for the exercise of “responsible freedom” (the too poor, the degenerate, children, recidivists, the feeble minded) are immediately invested by various bio-political apparatus whose mission is to restrain, educate, heal and care for their security and wellbeing until they are capable of self-governance.

## 8. The Foucaultian *Ethos* of Freedom

The examination of liberalism as a mode of governance which always contains the possibility of illiberal practices therefore raises the question: how can we relate to our freedom and aspirations toward emancipation outside the liberal governmentality described by Foucault? One can argue that Foucault's account of liberalism still depicts—just like his previous examination of disciplinary power—the modulation of our conceptions of freedom and capacities to resist as epiphenomena of some sort of historical and contingent practices of government, themselves products of other regimes which, in turn, were also contested and modified, this *ad infinitum*. Again, the description of liberal governmentality may give the impression that there is no external or normative standpoint by which we could condemn or criticize the liberal governmentality that shapes the way we think or act “freely.”

Foucault's governmentality studies can be interpreted as an answer to this critique. For Foucault, to frame our various conceptions of freedom as historical constructions made of various contingencies does not prevent us from thinking of freedom or to “act freely.” On the contrary: to gradually become aware of these contingencies precisely would allow us to “free” ourselves from the events and rationalities that made us the way we are. As Foucault's investigation into pastoral power and the counter-conducts they have generated illustrate, resistance does not emerge from this transcendental capacity to always see *right* against a power which would be repressive *per se* (Foucault 2004d, 2004e). Rather, resistance consolidates itself through the appropriation of a mode of government.<sup>34</sup> It works by turning certain governmental premises against themselves to generate alternatives. In other words, resistance would have no logic outside the practices of freedom which are stimulated by various modes of government.<sup>35</sup> Gaining this knowledge would precisely disclose the

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<sup>34</sup> See Rose's other inspiring studies for more details regarding the constitution our contemporary individualized and “psychologized” modes of subjectivation (Rose 1989, 1995, 1996).

<sup>35</sup> As Graham Burchell formulates it: “Government presupposes and requires the activity and freedom of the governed. It is for the simple reason that individuals are active when governed by others that, as Paul Veyne

contingent nature (i.e. the non-necessity) of the various practices of subjectification that have shaped us the way we are, and therefore generates a critical distance between these practices and ourselves (Foucault 2001e, p. 1393).

In other words, the analytical framework deployed by Foucault allows us to think of ourselves as historical beings who are nevertheless capable of breaking free from historical determinism precisely because of our capacity to examine our historical condition as being finite and contingent (thus capable of contemplating a future open to contingency).<sup>36</sup> Foucault's critical *ethos* therefore presupposes an understanding of time as historical (i.e. an historical ontology), which generates the possibility of thinking of ourselves "differently" by revealing the finite and contingent nature of the past events that have shaped us the way we are, which, in turn, indicate the horizon of an undetermined future (Foucault 2001; Hacking 2002). As David Owen puts it:

[...] the philosophical task which is motivated by this reflection is a 'critical ontology of ourselves', that is, an investigation of how we have become what we are today which both discloses the limits of what we are and raises the possibility of being otherwise than we are" (Owen 1994, pp. 160-161).

Hence, the injunction of Foucault's project is not to find the ultimate or absolute criterion that could secure the outcomes of all possible power dynamics, but to become aware of the contingent nature of the events, techniques, and rationalities that have made us the way we are, and the way we think ourselves to be. Foucault invites us to realize that the realities or

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says, there is a problem of subjectivity in politics. What kind of subjectivity is involved, for example, when individuals obediently perform their assigned tasks and conduct themselves in prescribed ways? What kind of reason do governments offer individuals for doing what they are told?" (Burchell 1991, p. 119).

<sup>36</sup>According to Ian Hacking's definition of historical ontology, such study would comprise all the three dimensions which have marked Foucault's intellectual journey: "this could be the name of a study that is concerned with the "truth through which we constitute ourselves as object of knowledge," with "power through which we constitute ourselves as subjects acting on others," and with "ethics through which we constitute ourselves as moral agents." An historical ontology thus implies the axes of knowledge, power, ethics (Hacking 2002, p. 3).

identities in which we are immersed are more mobile and open than we often think they are; this by introducing a form of awareness of their contingent nature described in terms of a “problematization of the present” (Dean 1999; Gordon 1991). This awareness would highlight the contingent and finite nature of everything that is historical, including the “truth regimes” by which are deployed the various games of true and false, as well as the different epistemic and ethical regimes of the self within which we insert ourselves by our actions.

By means of the same genealogical logic, however, one can criticize Foucault’s invitation to “free ourselves from ourselves” as a strategy profoundly engrained within the *episteme* of liberalism. The Foucaultian *ethos* of freedom—an *ethos* of a perpetual resistance or innovation against the historical processes that make us the way we are—can be explored as the ultimate psychological consecration of advanced modes of liberalism: namely, the way in which we perceive freedom as a perpetual act of resistance (an act of resistance which can only be actualized by turning certain premises of a regime of governance one must previously accept against themselves). It can be argued that, as a form of subjectivity shaped by liberal governmentality, we have internalised the historical patterns that have produced advanced liberalism as a mode of governance, including the process of resisting what we perceive as being authoritarian government (Rose 1996, see also Dean and Hindess 1998). In other words, we have become subjectivities who think of ourselves as perpetually in need of resisting *something* in order to be “free.”<sup>37</sup> On a psychological level, our endeavour toward resistance is translated as our ongoing desire to individualise and personalize our way of life (Rose 1989; 1995; 1998). Our “ongoing resisting way of life” would always presuppose something to oppose, something to react to, and/or something to innovate about.

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<sup>37</sup>As Graham Burchell describes it, liberalism is characterized by “a constant reflection on what is. Its internal regulative principle is seen as the need to maintain a suspicious vigilance over government so as to check its permanent tendency to exceed its brief in relation to what determines both its necessity and limits—society”(Burchell 1991: p. 143).

On a similar trajectory, Foucault's *ethos* of freedom presupposes a perpetual capacity of renewing resistance: a state of freedom which not only shifts or mutates as it goes along *historically* (this without any teleological direction except, perhaps, the ongoing labour of freedom), but also a freedom which can hardly be located in terms of agency. As such, Foucault's *ethos* of freedom oscillates between (1) an historical, quasi-structuralist account of freedom understood as the reversals of different rationalities of government from Christian pastoral to liberal governmentality, and (2) the evocation of a quasi-phenomenological self understood as an irreducible yet ungraspable agent of freedom. For many followers of Foucault, the elusive agent (author or participant) of the transformative "practices of freedom" would ultimately reside with the "self," understood as this irreducible discrete locus of resistance which perpetually escapes the various processes that attempt to subjugate it.<sup>38</sup> The self would be trusted to be the bearer of an *irreducible* freedom because *governmentalizing* practices, as "conducting conduct," precisely assume the presence of an irreducible state of freedom without which the problem of governing would not be a problem at all.

Following such reasoning, the consciousness of freedom emerges as a *negative* epiphenomenon along with various practices of subjection, which, in turn, presuppose the existence of a quasi-transcendental human freedom in order for these practices to exist. To be clear, freedom would not make any sense outside the attempts to suppress it. And in return, because we understand ourselves first and foremost as "free agents," any attempt to define us, control us or governmentalize us, ought to be met with criticism and/or resistance if our freedom and critical abilities are to endure and to make sense. As such, freedom conceived as the result of self-referential and immanent activities (which can be accounted for without

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<sup>38</sup>The collective, individual or relational Nature of the Foucaultian self remains, however, often unclear. See Tully 1993; Dean 1999; Rose 1999; Prozorov 2009.

recourse to any exteriorities or grand metaphysical explanations) appears to have inherited both the ideal that politics must be conducted as an activity for its own sake (following Machiavelli, Botero and the like), and its later liberal inflexion which grants to “civil society” and the individual a similar quality, separating society and individuals from its government which must be constantly checked and balanced through the possibility of public inquiries, opposition and resistance—and perhaps separating ultimately the individual from politics as a “community of destiny” altogether to become this “political ethics” consisting of a self-defining *ethos* only possible against the rift of adversity. Presented as such, Foucault’s *ethos* of freedom can be seen as profoundly shaped by the tradition of thought assuming that politics must be emancipated from any onto-theological tutelage, and the notion of liberal resistance which makes any overarching good that would prevail over (individual) liberty a source of imminent danger.

## 9. Conclusion and Discussion

Foucault’s analysis of power helps us to better understand why any mode of contestation or resistance can evolve into practices of regulation and rationalities of government. The reversibility and mutability of power relations described by Foucault help us to understand why we are witnessing such transformations and shifts from resistance to regulation, highlighting by the same token the necessity to study the various struggles for power in their immediate context at a micro level. For Foucault, to understand *how* power operates is to become increasingly aware of how various rationalities of government attempt to frame freedom, thus opening grounds for innovative modes of resistance. Only a perpetual work of vigilance able to track the reversals of power dynamics could save us from the otherwise constant tendency that any modes of resistance have to turn into the next mode of domination.

The rise of the green political rationalities as outlined in our first chapter is an excellent example of this, not only for green governmentality scholars like Timothy Luke, but also for Steven Milloy and Peter Huber. From a grass-roots movement of resistance (such as the Sierra Club and Greenpeace) denouncing the ecological practices of greedy corporations and irresponsible governments, the green movement would now be the next mode of governmental domination at the horizon. In his book entitled *Green Hell*, Milloy warns his readers that “there is almost no personal behaviour of yours that [greens] consider too trivial or too sacrosanct to regulate.” “So get ready,” he says, because “your choice of car, eating habits, and home energy usage are no longer your private business. Now it’s the government’s business” (Milloy 2009).<sup>39</sup> On a similar note, celebrating Adam Smith’s theory as being “about the limit of theory”, Huber emphasises the need for a “theory of means, not of ends” to address the trajectory of a far and unknowable future, endorsing implicitly the view that better processes are centred on free markets, not on prescription.<sup>40</sup> Foucault’s description of the framing of politics by governmental rationalities gives us a similar warning about the limits of any theory and the dangers they pose in their attempts to frame what necessarily exceeds them: a warning gesture that could easily be adapted to the problem of evoking Nature as the external source of a political authority we should listen to. As Timothy Luke and Eric Darier argue, when Nature is introduced as means to govern and to regulate human behaviours, then particular attention should be directed at enquiring exactly what is being enforced in the name of Nature (Luke, 1997; Darier, 1999).

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<sup>39</sup> Milloy 2009 quoted in Cheryl Hall in 2010. *Avoiding Doom and Gloom: Finding Freedom and Agency in the Path to Sustainability*, unpublished paper presented at the WPSA 2010 Annual Convention, San Francisco (CA).

<sup>40</sup> As Marius de Geus puts it: “Western liberal democracies have always stressed that the freedom to consume keeps the capitalist economic system going and constitutes an inalienable right of the individual citizen: the freedom to consume can be seen as the basic expression of the Lockean creed of valuing ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.’ In this liberal ideology the role of the government is certainly not to restrict consumer behaviour or to re-evaluate personal lifestyle choices in the light of sustainable development (Hall 2010).

And yet, Foucault's analysis of liberal governmentality also suggests that the exercise of our freedom can be equally co-opted as a pervasive mode of regulation. Foucault's studies in liberal governmentality reveal the contours of a governmental framework whose function is precisely to absorb and transform resistance as innovative and often deepening ways to secure social order and governance. It leaves nothing outside its reach. The strategy at the core of liberal governmentality is quite simple: resistance, as long as it addresses itself to government for correctives, reinforces the role of government as a "caretaker." Resistance is in fact vital to liberal governmentality for it expresses the desires and discontents of "civil society," to which governments can then respond by adopting various strategies as would good caretakers. Viewed from this perspective, grassroots movements, think-tanks and other resisting organizations are not so much repressed within liberal governmentality as they are encouraged to manifest themselves and speak up to authorities. Their resisting inputs would indeed be essential for they would help shaping the next governmental rationality, which, by assimilating critiques as demands to be further and better governed both deepens the regulative grip of government while restoring a sense of public and democratic consensus.<sup>41</sup> In short, liberal governmentality relies on our critical rationalities and agonistic tendencies to perpetuate itself as this ongoing state of renewals and crisis.

From a socio-economic perspective, such a configuration of power requires individuals to act and think of themselves as producers/consumers standing on the edge of the latest technological or innovative fix in order to maintain this self-reinforcing logic based on a market system where growth is deemed essential: a system which depends on an ever-

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<sup>41</sup> Our relation to political power has been shaped by what Foucault calls the "governmentalisation" of the state, "that is to say, it is in the name of forms of existence which have been shaped by political technologies of government that we, as individuals, and groups, make claims on or against the state. It is in the name of our governed existence as individual living beings, in the name of our health, of the development of our capabilities, of our membership of particular communities, of our ethnicity, of our gender, of our forms of insertion into social and economic life, of our age, of our environment, of the particular risk we may face and so on, that we both revile and invoke the power of the state" (Burchell 1991, p. 145).

growing cycle of consumption, in need of spiralling up through perpetual innovations, unsatisfying needs, multiplying identities and endless desires. In such an economy of power, freedom appears to be modulated not only as this possibility to freely consume or exchange, but also as this psychological disposition to innovate, to always desire otherwise, to resist stagnation, and to think of oneself in perpetual transformation. It is to claim, to obtain, to disdain, and to claim some more.

The only obstacle to the dominance of such a pervasive and all-encompassing system appears to be the recent discovery of a new kind of limit: the environmental cost of exercising and promoting such unlimited “freedom.” A governmentality which is based on an agonistic or adversarial configuration of power, which advocates no definition of the Good besides securing the freedom of individuals and states from a self-centered perspective, is indeed poorly equipped to deal with the adverse impacts that such freedom may cause on a Nature incapable of regenerating itself fast enough to meet the human increasing needs and disturbance activities. As our first chapter has shown, there are many answers to the problem of scarcity and environmental destruction following the global dissemination of industrial and capitalist ways of life, ranging from greening capitalism, green versions of socialism, eco-anarchism and deep ecology solutions. We also find green deniers, ranging from sceptics about the consensus reached by the scientific community about the impacts of human activities on global warming, to those who see in environmental regulations a pernicious way to control the masses and limit individual liberties.<sup>42</sup> But ultimately, as Foucault’s notion of governmentality helps to make clear, all of the above remaining “political rationalities” are incapable of rising above the framework of a meta “rationality of government” which is visible not only through the gradual governmentalisation of the state since the 17-18<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>42</sup>See Hoggan, J., Littlemore, R. D. (2009). *Climate Cover-up: The Crusade to Deny Global Warming*.

(principally through the development of political economy and the medicalization of populations through the rise of biopolitics), but also through the gradual governmentalisation of our ways of experiencing circular politics in terms of resistance vis-à-vis regulation practices. What Foucault's notion of governmentality helps us to understand above all is how modern politics has been framed by a governmental rationality which positions the political actions of citizens on a reactive and often petitioning mode toward governmental authorities, subsequently to be co-opted as demands to be "better taken care of" and properly regulated. It is this governmental rationality which would now frame the environmental debates and acts of green resistance.

On the one hand, the rise of ecological rationalities can thus be seen as the logical extension of the dissemination of biopolitics and the deepening of a rationale of security which now target our relations to the environment as a source of peril for the wellbeing of populations (explaining the shift of the first radical critiques of environmentalism toward their cooption into process of governance). In the name of freedom, then, such ecologizing dissemination and deepening should be carefully monitored. Yet, on the other hand, the dissemination and deepening of such green rationales seems to be framed by a rationality of government operating via the perpetual overturning of any limits to our freedom of "becoming otherwise than prescribed," that is an ideological tendency endorsed by Foucault's *ethos* of freedom/resistance which appears without any serious resource to challenge the homogenizing *de-culturalization* via the global spread of liberal individualism (modulated by Foucault through the prism of practices of the Self that no overarching rationality can control for too long); a *de-valuation* of Nature as merely a social construct constantly shifting (thus forbidding any teleological or rational goal to be articulated outside the conceptual constructs we solipsistically frame ourselves with); and a *de-collectivization* through the capitalist

privatization of industries and resources (no solution on how to govern ourselves economically has been formulated by Michel Foucault's severe critiques of the Soviet regime and socialism as governmentality), all of which contributes to fuelling the current ecological crisis we are experiencing by strengthening the paradigm by which other possible relationships to Nature are basically denied by default.

Analytically speaking, notions such as "green" or "eco" governmentality seem natural extensions of Foucault's own notion of governmentality. But normatively and ontologically speaking, the critical *ethos* assumed by most Foucaultian and green governmentality scholars remains problematic, in part because such *ethos* assumes that Nature cannot be an entity in its own right or a vector of transcultural norms, but only is the result of some conceptual and cultural constructs toward which we should be particularly suspicious. Our challenge is thus to better understand how the current greening of our political rationalities can be seen as deepening governmental studies through notions such as green or eco governmentality (this by raising our awareness to that which may well form the next global modes of domination and subjectification), while simultaneously engaging the underlying ontological and political assumptions found in green governmentality studies, which, far from challenging the edifice of modern governmentality, may well be in its very heart.

## Chapter 3:

### Green Governmentality and the Problem of Ontology

The purpose of mastery over nature is the security of life—and its enhancement alike for individual and the species. But the means presently available for pursuing these objectives encompass such potential destructiveness that their full employment in the struggle for existence would leave in ruins all the advantages so far gained at the price of so much suffering.

William Leiss, *The domination of Nature*

#### 1. Introduction

As we have examined in our last chapter, the concept of governmentality both relays and deepens Foucault's previous micro analysis of the capillary and productive relations of power by introducing what Foucault calls "the problem of government," investigating the various political rationalities and technologies of power forming different political regimes stretching from earlier "pastoral-shepherd games" to modern liberal governmentalities. More precisely, I have shown that Foucault's governmentality studies examined the emergence of political economy, security, population management as informing the modern modulations of this "problem of government," now exceeding the subtractive\punitive sovereign-jurisdictional power of sovereignty through the creation of various optimizing norms aiming at improving the well-being and productivity of individuals and populations (i.e. the rise of the Welfare state).

The concept of governmentality helped us to identify various processes leading not only to the governmentalization of the state, but of politics itself; this by channelling any forms of

resistance as demands directed towards governmental authority, which are then evoked to justify further assimilation and control. Following such analysis, freedom has been identified as an important component of the mechanisms by which modern governmentality can maintain itself, which led to our critique of Foucault's comprehension of freedom as the *modus operandi* by which liberal governmentality could constantly reproduce and renew itself. This critique has helped us to make sense of the problem outlined at the end of chapter one, as to why ecological modes of resistance are increasingly co-opted by processes of governmentalization which are instrumental to the modernization of Nature criticized in the first place.

This chapter will address the notion of green governmentality and the ontological commitments assumed by green governmentality scholars in their critique of the introduction of "Nature" at the center of Western political rationalities. While offering powerful critiques of the modernization of Nature and its entry into modern governmentality, I suggest that the attempts by green governmentality scholars to politicize ontology are themselves the result of specific cultural inflexions leading to the adoption of a disenchanted and instrumental paradigm dominated by what Leiss identifies as the supremacy of "subjective reason" (Leiss 2008). More precisely, I argue that the nominalist and constructivist assumptions toward "Nature" we find in green governmentality studies have been both produced and dissolved alongside the rise of modern culture privileging technicity and the supremacy of epistemology over ontology.

The first part of this chapter explores how the notion of governmentality can serve to critically engage the introduction of "Nature" at the center of Western political rationalities. After having identifying the ontological assumptions endorsed by most green governmentality

scholars in their critiques, the second part discusses some classical formulations of ontology, as well as some of their medieval and modern counterparts, to better understand the different entries that have shaped the problem of ontology up to its politicization by Foucaultian and green governmentality scholars. I conclude by suggesting that the attempts made by green governmentality scholars to politicize ontology are themselves the outcome of a specific cultural itinerary leading to the modern treatment of ontology, hence ill-equipped to answer the ecological challenges associated with the former.

## 2. What is Green Governmentality?

The theme of “green governmentality” problematizes the (re)introduction of “Nature” at the center of Western political rationalities (Darier 1999; Luke 1999; Rutherford 1999). It proposes that the work of Foucault on governmentality is of central importance in analyzing the production and circulation of knowledge, technologies, and rationalities of government which appeal to notions of “Nature.” The variously disseminated eco-rationalities and environmental technologies are analysed by green governmentality scholars as extensions of both the disciplinary networks described by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* and the biopolitics hypothesis formulated in his later work. Foucault’s notion of biopolitics, in particular, is viewed as enlarging all of what is necessary to support “life” through the emergence of various environmental practices and regulations (Luke 1997; Rutherford 2007; Darier 1999).

Although Foucault’s work has been mainly concerned with the social processes of objectification\subjectification by which individuals and groups govern themselves and others, it has been suggested that his work on governmentality can be useful to the examination of the modern problem of government in relation to the question of the

environment (Rutherford 1999). In other words, it has been argued that we can expand Foucault's analysis of governmentality to investigate how the ordering of "things" progressively included variables such as "life," "health," "sustainability" *and* "environment" to generate new rationalities of government aimed at making visible the relations between "things" via the production of ecological rationalities of government. The modern problem of government would not only extend to social questions, but also to ecological ones. Foucault's concept of "governmentality" would thus be useful not only for exploring the dimensions of our experience constituted "by all those ways of reflecting and acting that aimed to shape, manage, regulate the conduct of persons," but also to repose the problematic of normalization in conjunction with Nature as it has taken shape in the West over the last three centuries (Rose 1996, Gordon 1991; Foucault 2004d, p. 111). As Stephanie Rutherford and Eric Darier suggest, Foucault's work on governmentality—and more particularly his concept of biopolitics—can be reframed as the study of "eco-politics" when the conditions under which populations are managed are subsumed under larger attempts to manage all of Life with the deployment of ecological rationalities of government (Rutherford S. 2007; Darier 1999).

Foucault's analysis of governmentality can first be expanded to investigate how the ordering of "things" progressively included variables such as "life," "health," "sustainability" and "environment," to generate rationalities of government making visible the relations between "things" via the production of ecological rationalities of government. To control and manage one's territory—its information, resources, pastures, forests, ores, water, access to sea, food sources, strategic locations—is surely one of the oldest and more central problems for political authorities across time span and cultures. Political turmoil over environmental issues was experienced not only by European peoples from very early on over deforestation problems and mining pollution issues, but also in the context of colonial expansion which was

conceived by many as a solution to such problems (Moore 2006). The control and optimization of newly redesigned national territories (which involve its precise knowledge) was therefore not the only vector of a growing environmental consciousness (Scott 1998); controlling the commercial routes and maintaining military supremacy on oceans were also crucial to economic development and political domination between rival European powers. As such, the emergence of environmental rationalities appears intimately related to the expansion of Venetian, French, Dutch and English maritime powers, all competing for commercial activities on strategic locations which included oceanic island colonies and various plantations particularly sensitive to deforestation and soil erosion. Problems of the latter sort led to new environmental awareness in relation to land specificity, botany, meteorology and map-making (Grove 1995, p. 475). It was in fact in the tropical colonies, Grove argues, that scientists “first came to a realization of the extraordinary speed at which people, and Europeans in particular, could transform and destroy their natural environment” (Grove 1998).

In between the production of such knowledge and the development of the skills required to exploit distant colonies emerged the multiple relations of power\knowledge that progressively shaped the “ecologization” of our understanding of politics (Moore 2006; Headrick 1988; Crosby 1986). Such relations can be traced not only in the European colonial annexations and the environmental innovations they induced, but also in the growing concerns that such activities stimulated toward the non-European “others” found in these Tropical regions against which the “moderns Europeans” have shaped their identity in important respects. Such relations and concerns all contributed to a “global perception” of natural and intercultural interconnectedness (Grove 1995, p. 476; Goodie 2006, p. 33). By expanding Foucault’s reading of governmentality to include “eco-governmentality,” we can therefore deepen our

understanding of the modern problem of government to these “in-between relations” that have connected the different theatres of governmentality via a primordial “environment” which is increasingly colonized by various power\knowledge relations in a growing attempt to governmentalize Nature. As such, the emergence of Western environmental preoccupations appears intimately tied with what Foucault describes as this art of “governing at distance” by which he characterizes liberal modes of governance. The noticeable particularity is that distance here takes its literal meaning; the spreading of managerial colonialism and the shaping of various political apparatus to “govern at distance,” which, from the fifteenth-century onward, emerged in conjunction with mounting ecological concerns, played a key role in the creation of this global and interconnected environment open to exploitation from which the so-called “advanced neo-liberal rationalities of government” would later blossom.

By expanding Foucault’s analysis of biopolitics to include eco-governmentality, we can also notice that not only the notion of population, but also the one of “environment” has been shaped through the emergence of statistics and inductive modes of reasoning, leading to computer sciences and predictive models, all working to make predictable, and thus controllable, the random and chaotic relations that such a concept entails (Foucault 2004e, p. 323; Hacking 2006; Rose 1999). Hence, following Foucault’s insights on the political significance of statistics, we can explore the ways in which the progressive mathematization of Nature has enabled various ecological rationalities and technologies to produce a wide range of “norms” which refer to Nature not only to supplement the power of the “sovereignty-law” apparatus, but also to shape a series of “truth-claims” about ecological modes of conduct by which rational individuals are expected to govern themselves and others (Desjardins 1999; Ashford and Caldart 2008).

By exploring the ways in which the concept of “population” (as a body-species) and “environment” (as its territorial necessity) relate to each other, we can also track the emergence of different discursive strategies and rationalities of government making use of various organic, growth and health metaphors to explain the relations between the two notions through the formation of scientific disciplines such as “ecology.” It is a well-known fact that “ecology” and its associated ethics emerged largely as a reaction against the “anti-naturalism” ascribed to utilitarian models of science: that is, as a reaction wanting to expand the reductive and utterly too mechanical focus of these models, while keeping laboratory methods intact (Goodie 2006, p. 36). Less known is the observation of Jo-Ann Goodie which points toward the affiliation between Darwin’s theory of evolution and the emergence of “ecology” to explain the resolution of this ambiguity, highlighting as such the leading influence of what will become a science examining “everything in the physical and biological environment that affected survival in the broadest sense” (Goodie 2006, p. 37; Hawkins 1997, p. 136).

Deeply influenced by such ecological representations, the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries witnessed the emergence of different rationalities of government working actively at bridging medical, social, economical, biological *and* environmental arguments to formulate different “evolutionary patterns” in which not only life, but the management of everything which includes life, becomes the overriding criterion guiding political actions (Robert 1938; Campbell 2007; Schneider 1990; Jones 1986). Such “evolutionary patterns” significantly contributed to shaping a “modern culture” that perceived itself as “naturally” entitled to dominate “inferior races” according to an evolutionary logic in which only the well-adapted, wealthy, technologically-advanced “organisms” should survive (Hawkins 1997). The economic translation of this argument progressively asked that all “natural resources”—including human populations—come to be envisioned as “commodities” and/or “state

resources” that had to be monitored, protected and enhanced by a growing variety of “eco-experts” working for the most part in coordination with state actors (Broberg and Roll-Hansen 1996). Entire societies were consequently analyzed and compared through the scope of their working productivity, vitality, good behaviour, adaptability and economical powers, leading to the development of racial and eugenic practices based on class, sexual orientations, geographical locations and ethnological and technological distinctions in order to rank the evolutionary continuum of the human race (Foucault 1999, p. 229; Rose 2007; Agamben 1998; Bauman 1989).

To be clear, the concept of “population” or even “life” could not have supported alone the articulation of biopolitics which, according to Foucault, operated through the expansion of medical rationalities, the deployment of state racism, security apparatuses, statistical inferences and the emergence of political economy (2004d; 2004e). By deepening the “evolutionary argument,” it is thus possible to broaden the study of an assemblage of frameworks in which everything necessary to “Life”—and not only “life” captured through the concept of population and race—had to be considered through the political integration of various ecological sciences (Foucault 1997, p. 52). In other words, the concept of eco-governmentality enlarges the problematization of modern governmentality by suggesting that the problems of “life,” “environment” and “government” have now coincided with the emergence of “eco-politics,” crystallizing a nexus of power\knowledge which deeply reorganizes in a relational way the three movements constitutive of modern governmentality, namely: government, population, and political economy (Rutherford 1999a; 1999b; Luke 1999; Darier 1999; Goodie 2006).

By expanding Foucault's analysis of governmentality to include the study of eco-governmentality, "the immanent logic" running across the different rationalities of government analyzed by Foucault is only intensified. By the "immanent logic" of governmentality, I refer to the idea implicit in *Raison d'état* that upholds *inherent* political principles that must be kept separate from any onto-theological tutelage (Foucault 2004e, p. 263; Malette 2006, p. 78). The idea is recast in notions of "civil society," "economy," and "private property," conceived as autonomous domains entitled to their own rights against the Political. Following a similar logic, it appears that contemporary ecological rationalities of government reproduce both the derivative and dualistic implications attached to any political rationality which appeals to deeper or more intrinsic levels of reality as bearers of their own truths: Nature, many ecologists profess, is something in front of which we stand and to which we should listen. As such, while these ecological rationalities open new realms of political intervention with unprecedented reach, they also deploy new limits to human action: this time, by arguing that the natural world which supports all of life has intrinsic rules that no government or human industry should violate (Agar, 2001).

By exploring the impacts of these various ecological considerations, we are witnessing not only the intensification, but also the transformation of "the immanent logic" that we have described in our second chapter. We can better understand an ecological logic that reorganizes in profound ways the dualistic and derivative assumptions embedded in our understanding of the Political. We can better understand the re-articulation of new sets of distinctions operating to make cogent the justifications of the disciplinary/regulative ecological enterprises, and the fabrication of a more inclusive concept by which the regulation of the living can actually expand to everything which is necessary to life: namely, an interconnected and primordial

environment which the technologically-advanced societies and their scientists are now in a position to predict, police and regulate (Osborne 1996, pp. 116-7).

A critical examination of the entry of Nature into modern governmentality is surely helpful to understand not only the ways in which modern rationalities of government and technologies of power have been shaped, but also the intensification of ecological models of governance now operating increasingly at a global scale. The work of green governmentality scholars helps us to capture the emergence of ecological rationalities of government, technologies of power, ethical regimes and the making of new green regimes of “truth” which limit, shape and modulate the immanent field of freedom by which we internalize green rationalities and modes of conduct as part of our identity (Agrawal 2005). Ecological regimes of power\knowledge can indeed be found at all levels of what Foucault calls the “problem of government,” from green techniques of subjectification by which individuals shape their own behaviours in terms of environmental responsiveness along with the internalization of economical, medical and spiritual arguments, to academic and professional programs working at configuring “Nature” as something to be managed by experts through the development of resource managerialism, risk and recreationist management (Luke 1996), to eco or green psychotherapy now adopting an ecological paradigm to generate well-being and balance in one’s life (Roszak, Gomes and Kanner 1995; Buzzel and Chalquist 2009), to the objectification of people’s, organizations, businesses’ and government’s behaviour in terms of their carbon footprint or other indicators of their ecological performance and responsibility for environmental degradations (Emerson and al. 2010; Starke and Mastny 2009).

### 3. Green Governmentality, Resistance and the Problem of Ontology

By stimulating our awareness of these processes, the concept of eco-governmentality assumes Foucault's critical\historical *ethos*, which, while operating against the backdrop of an assumed historicity, aims to break free from the risk of complete determinism by introducing a form of alertness described in terms of a "problematization of the present" (Dean 1999; Gordon 1991). The awareness of the open structure of our present would be highlighted by acknowledging the contingencies and finitude of everything that is of an historical condition, thus revealing the limitations of the "truth regimes" by which are deployed the various games of true and false (also historical), as well as the different epistemic and ethical regimes of the self within which we insert ourselves by our own actions.<sup>43</sup> To put it otherwise, the concept of green governmentality bears Foucault's critical *ethos* which assumes an understanding of time as historical (i.e. an historical ontology) allowing the possibility to think of ourselves "differently" by realizing the finitude and contingency of past events that have shaped the way we are, which, in turn, points toward an undetermined future (Foucault 2001; Hacking 2002).<sup>44</sup> Hence, the concept of eco-governmentality helps us to identify the risk of eco modes of domination, while highlighting "practices of freedom" that could help us to disentangle ourselves from such green conditioning.

The problem we have identified with the concept of governmentality in our last chapter remains, however, in its entirety when it comes to eco-governmentality; the multiplication of ecological rationalities appears to be used both to fuel "practices of resistance" against what

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<sup>43</sup>A clarification on Foucault's notion of ethics, as Ian Hacking formulates it: Foucault "did not think of the moral agents as something universalizable, apt for all rational beings. On the contrary, we constitute ourselves at a place and time, using material that has a distinctive and *historically* formed organization. The genealogy to be unravelled is how, as people in civilizations with *histories*, we have become moral agents, through constituting ourselves as moral agents in quite specific, local, *historic* ways" (Hacking 2002, pp. 2-4). The emphasis is mine.

<sup>44</sup>To quote Ian Hacking's illuminating definition of historical ontology: "this could be the name of a study that is concerned with "truth through which we constitute ourselves as object of knowledge," with "power through which we constitute ourselves as subjects acting on others," and with "ethics though which we constitute ourselves as moral agents." An historical ontology thus implies the axes of knowledge, power, ethics (Hacking 2002, p. 3). According to David Owen, "the philosophical task which is motivated by this reflection is a 'critical ontology of ourselves', that is, an investigation of how we have become what we are today which both discloses the limits of what we are and raises the possibility of being otherwise than we are" (Owen 1994, pp. 160-161).

are perceived as the fruits of reckless and rapacious capitalism and corporatism, and to deepen “practices of governmentalization” by which new norms are deployed to control behaviours from an ecological standpoint where there is no more externality. Hence, the danger would be the proliferation of “green practices of governmentalization” penetrating (thanks to our own demands to be better governed) all layers of the relational tissue which binds all and everything, which supports all living and non-living beings alike, and which makes inside\outside boundaries a secondary question. The cause evoked to do so would be the protection of “Nature” in all its complexity, diversity and unity, namely a global environment made of infinite localities we all share, human and non-human actors\subjects\objects alike. Now it is clear from the various works of green governmentality that we should resist, or at least be aware, of actual or potential Green modes of domination and ecological depoliticization. Preaching resistance becomes, however, a complex issue when we understand that resistance and governmentalization collapse into one another through the framework of advanced liberal governmentality in which our resistances toward governmental authorities serve as steppingstones for deeper modes of regulation. At the core of our ecological predicaments, it appears that our very conception of freedom versus tyranny falls into desuetude when it comes to the emerging ecological paradigm.

Such desuetude and incapacity to go beyond what I call the paradigm of “modern voluntarism” along with perpetual demands for “more undetermined freedom” can be seen in the lingering nominalist and constructivist assumptions endorsed by green governmentality scholars to sustain their denunciation of “Nature.” First, in line with what has been two centuries of metaphysical and ontological bashing, green governmentality scholars often assume that “Nature” is meaningless “unless or until particular human beings assign significance to it by interpreting some of its ambivalent signs as meaningful to them” (Luke

1996). Because humans constantly look at natural patterns in different ways, it is suggested that Nature's meanings will always be multiple, unfixed and constantly shifting (Luke 1996). Nature is therefore reduced to a nominal construct whose noumenal signification remains inaccessible.

Second, it is often suggested (or implied) that "Nature" constitutes the imposture of a pre-given, aprioristic and universalistic postulate that frames the activity of politics. In other words, it is assumed that we are constructing socially and politically what we are thinking. Only by understanding the polysemiotic definition of "Nature" and its inherent constructed constitution can we safeguard our capacity to think both Nature and politics otherwise, in brief, to safeguard what sets us apart from the rest of Nature: our human freedom to invent and negotiate ourselves anew constantly (Luke 1996; Sandilands 1999). Only such informed vigilance, it is suggested, can prevent the return of an all-encompassing Nature viewed as a dangerous normative gateway for the deployment of aprioristic arguments on how to conceive what is otherwise perceived by some as an absurd, senseless human existence (Lanthier and Oliver, 1999); as a weapon of oppression (Quigley, 1999); or the baseline for "a series of Draconian codes governing ever more intimate aspects of our individuals' lives" (Sandilands, 1999).

#### 4. Ontology as Political Problem

It is clear that our understandings of Nature and politics have been deeply interwoven in the history of Western political thought. "Nature" has been often summoned to rationalize and justify social and political practices and the truths people hold to be fundamental (Coujou, 2006). Nature has been at the center of many derivative arguments articulated to justify and maintain the existence of specific political and social modes of organization (because Nature

is X then society must be Y).<sup>45</sup> Recently we have witnessed the emergence of a culture labelled as “modern” and even “*postmodern*” reversing the traditional usage of derivative arguments (because society is X then Nature must be Y), when it did not reject any derivative arguments outright. The very idea of a unified and ordered Nature from which normative implications could be deduced is now looked upon with great suspicion, especially by green governmentality scholars. Echoing such distrust toward derivative arguments and ontologies, we find Johanna Oksala suggesting that “politics discloses a world: it becomes essentially a struggle to realise a unique world through the definition of what there is” (Oksala 2007, p. 14). How we disclose Reality or Nature would therefore be political to the core. In other words, the question of “what is there to be?” or “how should we understand reality?” (ontology) would be politics by other means.

Hence, the task of philosophy, Oksala suggests while describing the method of Michel Foucault, “is not to secure knowledge about the true Nature of reality that could then be converted into the right political order. The radicality of his [Michel Foucault] method lies rather in showing how the ontological order of things is itself the outcome of a political struggle: ontology is politics that has forgotten itself” (Oksala 2007, p. 16). We can see that Oksala’s description of the relationship between ontology and politics shows a profound mistrust toward the act of disclosing reality, as if all attempts to delineate a unified reality would *de facto* equate with attempts to enframe our political freedom in potentially dangerous ways. The project of “politicizing ontology,” as Oksala formulates it with heavy Foucaultian undertones, can thus be understood as a project to resist whatever may attempt to frame *in*

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<sup>45</sup> I use the terms derivative and dualistic following the definitions formulated by John M. Meyer (2001): “On the one hand, a number argue that the distinguishing characteristic of Western thought is that politics (and human culture in general) is completely divorced from Nature. I refer to this as the *dualist* account.... On the other hand, many view Western political thought as replete with normative theories derived from conception on Nature, whether that conception be the teleology of Aristotelians, the clock-like mechanism of early modern scientists, or the invisible hand of Darwinian selection. I refer to this as the *derivative* interpretation” (2001, p. 2). The emphasis is mine.

*toto* our comprehension of reality or Nature: to resist all attempts to limit our political potential to actualize our freedom in other ways than prescribed (Oksala 2007).<sup>46</sup>

But before the expression of any Foucaultian mistrust, ontology was already a concept often greeted with great suspicion by many. Ontology is a word mostly associated to the dark age of scholasticism, where the various entanglements between religion and metaphysics are largely viewed as having slowed down the emergence of genuine science, technological progress, rationalism and even democracy. For many people, ontology is a word that brings us back to the dusty work of Aristotle, its complicated and often fanatical medieval reshuffling, its abandonment by a culture gauging knowledge predominantly along technological progress, and its no less cryptic comebacks in the fields of cybernetics and Heideggerian studies, where ontology gets respectively instrumentalized and existentialized.<sup>47</sup> So exactly what is there to politicize? Should we understand Oksala's politicization of ontology as an invitation to view all attempts to define "what is?" as potentially dangerous political gestures that must be resisted? But surely ontology has received different formulations since Aristotle. Should we label them as all potential suspects? And how can we be sure that this suspicion cultivated against the question of "what is?" is not itself the product of a specific worldview, a specific culture "as applied ontology," erected against anything that may prevent the absolutization of its freedom?

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<sup>46</sup> I am not suggesting that Oksala ignores the *verso* of the dangers associated with any comprehensive vision of Nature, namely the horizon of significations, which, despite the constant danger of domination associated with any comprehensive view of Nature, also offers the grounds by which contestations may occur, and thus by which freedom may be experienced. What I suggest is that this dynamic mode of contestation and struggle which Oksala draws from the work of Michel Foucault is here prioritized over any possible comprehensive understanding of Nature from the onset, and, as such, is at risk of becoming itself a totalizing understanding of Nature negating other possibilities to relate to Nature by imposing its own agonistic and nominalist ontology above all others.

<sup>47</sup> I use a comprehensive understanding of the notion of existentialism here when I refer to Heidegger's treatment of the question of ontology. By existentialism I do not mean a narrow concern with man on the part of Heidegger, but with the relations between man and Being, and the way in which the later presences is known. See the introduction of William Lovitt in Heidegger, Martin. *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Translated and Edited by Lovitt, William. New York: Harper Perennial.

In such a context, one can ask: does a unified or even shared conception of Reality or Nature stand a chance? Or should we continue to block any attempts to delineate Nature or Reality as a political stratagem to realise a unique and universal world endangering our capacity to be different than prescribed, to resist whatever presents itself as becoming mainstream, hence to be free? But then, how should we handle the current ecological crisis which seems to imply that more “undetermined freedom” is not part of the solution, but rather part of the problem? How can we not get bored long enough to sustain a political commitment that will respect the time needed by Nature (if only such entity exists) to recover from our past and current ecological abuses? And how can we prevent what appears to be the growing domination of a technological and managerial paradigm, increasingly perceived as the only viable solution to our ecological crisis? These are some of the questions that the next part of this chapter will begin to explore.

## 5. Ontology as an Idea: A Brief Overview

Let us begin by offering a brief overview of the concept of ontology in the history of Western philosophy in order to better understand what can possibly be meant by the terms “politicizing ontology.”<sup>48</sup> Offering a complete history of the concept of ontology is beyond the scope of this chapter. What follows is merely an itinerary in the vast and perhaps unbounded domain of ontology, marking one of the many trails by which it is possible to assert that ontology can (and often should) be politicized. Our itinerary goes from the Greek understanding of ontology in which Nature is perceived eternal; to theological accounts in which Nature

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<sup>48</sup> For the next section discussing the itinerary of ontology in Western thought, I use principally the sixth first tomes of Frederick Copleston *A History of Philosophy* and the two volumes of Jean-Paul Coujou *Philosophie Politique et Ontology*. To the best of my knowledge, I did not find any historical survey directly on the concept of ontology.

becomes a finite Creation; to a research account of Nature discarding the notion of ontology in favour of value-freedom, epistemology, and instrumental reasoning; to contemporary formulations of ontology via its technologization (“as a means to an end”), its historicization (as “applied cultures”), and its radical reformulation with Heidegger, which, I suggest, acts as the conditions of possibility for the politicization of ontology. Our itinerary is not geared toward comparing the newest treatments of ontology with the oldest in term of progress or improvement (Heidegger 1977, p. 118). Our itinerary is rather an attempt to put in conversation different interpretations of Nature that have emerged in part by being already in conversation one with another through the discipline of recorded history and philosophy of science.

#### 6. Greek Ontology: Nature as Eternal

The term “ontology” is often used in diverse ways and with different connotations.

Etymologically speaking, the term “ontology” refers to a conjunction of the Greek words *on to* (“what is”) and *logos* (“reason or discourse”). The term ontology can therefore be loosely translated as “rational discourse on what is (or Being)”. As a discipline, ontology refers to a branch of metaphysics which is broadly defined as the philosophical exploration of what we might consider the first or most general principles of reality.<sup>49</sup> In its classical formulation, ontology came to designate the part of philosophy which studies the first causes and principles of physics, the study of “beings *qua* beings,” influenced in this definition by the seminal work of Aristotle. According to mainstream history of Western philosophy, the project of knowing the primordial causes and principles (or patterns) of what we understand as “the natural world” was articulated before Aristotle by thinkers known as the “pre-Socratics.” One of the

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<sup>49</sup>Metaphysics can be described as the “philosophical exploration into what we might consider the first or most general principles of reality. It purports to investigate themes such as: the nature and structure of the universe; the basic facts of existence; the broad structures of reality; and how we might represent these features to ourselves. Metaphysics is usually comprehended as that inquiry which explores the most general features of human and cultural existence, as based on how this reality might appear or be depicted by us” (Asch, 2009).

main particularities of the doctrines of the so-called pre-Socratic philosophers was their relative independence from theological accounts of the origin of the universe (i.e. Hesiod's *Theogony*). The pre-Socratic philosophers displayed an astonishing degree of abstraction and sophistication in their various theorizations of the causes and principles of the cosmos, ranging from Anaximander's evolutionary hypothesis about Man's origin, to Democritus' and Leucippus materialist atomic theory (Naddaf 2005).

Despite their differences, most pre-Socratic thinkers were convinced of the reign of laws in the universe. They generally assumed that these laws were coextensive with rationality and the structure of the cosmos from an immanent and comprehensive perspective, so that these laws could be deduced by reason (Logos). In other words, most pre-Socratic philosophers believed in a law-governed universe that is neither the plaything of mere caprices of the Gods (Gods were themselves subjugated to these universal laws), nor the result of lawless spontaneity (except perhaps Democritus on some accounts), which would make any rational attempt to account for the causes and principle of the universe useless. The pre-Socratics are often depicted as the first "discoverers" of "Nature," if we understand by "Nature" an organized physical system governed by immanent laws (Copleston 1993, vol. 3, p. 406), and the instigators of the notion of "Cosmos," which, according to Koyré, is linked to this idea of hierarchically-ordered finite world-structure divided between a sublunary world and supralunary world, each having its respective laws (Koyré 1968, p. 20). Pre-Socratic thinkers were mostly interested in the problems of birth, change, death, decay and re-birth. They valued for its own sake a mode of knowledge that could explain these cycles, thus a mode of knowledge itself above these cycles, eternally true, capable of transcending the realm of mere opinions (Copleston 1993, vol. 1, pp. 13-21). In short, pre-Socratic philosophers busied themselves with discovering "the ultimate substratum of things, the principle that is neither

generated nor destroyed, but from which particular objects arise and into which they pass away” (Copleston 1993, vol. 1, p. 289).

Now Aristotle is reputed for being the first Greek philosopher to articulate a systematic investigation of Being. Drawing analytical distinctions about the different manners in which entities may exist, Aristotle investigated being *qua* being (*on hei on*) according to categories such as substance, matter, subject, the efficient and the final cause. Here the concept of Being received different formulations, ranging from being in general (*kath'houlou*), being as the first substance (*prote ousia*), being as what is separate (*choriston*) and being as unchanging (*akineton*) (Halbfass 1992, pp. 2-6). In line with his pre-Socratic predecessors, Aristotle's ambition was to acquire a universalistic knowledge about the first principles of Being (Copleston 1993, tome 1, p. 287). To do so, Aristotle believed that we ought to search for what stands as universal in the nature of a being, in spite of the accidents whose contingent nature we cannot deduce or define.<sup>50</sup> Aristotle's quest is however geared toward knowing the principle which explains the movement whereby objects are generated and destroyed, rather than the ultimate *substratum* of everything there is. Even if all things are the product of a single material cause, Aristotle asks, what explains the process leading to diversity and change? To answer this question, Aristotle poses the problem of movement in terms of efficient and final causes.

At the risk of considerable oversimplification, we can divide Aristotle's account of movement in two broad categories: movements which are attributable to an external cause (push or pull), and movements which are generated by an intrinsic principle initiated by the very nature of the body in question (toward the goal of bringing it back to its “natural state” through

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<sup>50</sup> See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, VI (E) 2.-4. In Aristotle. 1948. *Metaphysics*. Tr. By Ross, W.D. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

generation). For Aristotle, movement is described as a qualitative process or a state of actualization in a universe divided between a sub and superlunary world in which everything tends to go toward its “natural location” (Koyré 1968, p. 26). The superlunary world would be inhabited by heavenly bodies made of *aether* that cannot experience any change, other than circular and eternal movement; while the Earth, also spherical in shape, would rest at the center of the universe, which is organized according to an hierarchical principle putting the inorganic matter at the bottom, then the plants, then the animals, then rational humans (whose active component—the *Nous*—pre-exists the body and is eternal).

Because Aristotle assumed that what is eternal, unchangeable and self-generated is superior to its contrary; and that it is impossible to have an infinite series of existent sources of movement (*Physics*, book 8), Aristotle came to the conclusion that the principle which explains all movements can only be found in the existence of an unchangeable being (or many of them), fully actual, pure act, cause of motion while itself not moved, acting as the final cause of everything by standing in contrast to their respective state of privation: the First Unmoved Mover.<sup>51</sup> The influence of neo-Platonism and Christianity on the reception of such a metaphysical explanations led many to believe that Aristotle’s First Unmoved Mover endorsed an immaterial and spiritualist principle compatible with the monotheistic God or the transcendental One.<sup>52</sup> This, however, better describes the ontological doctrine of his teacher, Plato. We find in Plato’s doctrine a much more contrasted distinction between the supra-sensible (attainable by Reason) and the sensible (viewed as the inferior realm) as attested by his doctrine of Forms.<sup>53</sup> The Forms are described as the causes and the essences of things we find in the world, crafted originally by the Demiurge (the efficient cause), and driven to

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<sup>51</sup> See Aristotle, *Physics* 8.6, 258b26-259a9; *Metaphysics*, 1026a 6-32.

<sup>52</sup> See Aristotle on this in *Metaphysics*, A, 987 b 1-10.

<sup>53</sup> See Plato, *Republic* 596 a 6-7; *Phaedo*, 102 b1.

imitate the Good (the final cause), namely the eternally self-subsistent and monoeidic Form.<sup>54</sup> Meeting half way the position of Heraclitus (that sensible things are always in a state of flux), Plato accepts the idea of a true Being, but not in the static terms of Parmenides equating the universe with the static One (Copleston 1993, vol. 1, p. 201). For Plato, the One transcends the world.<sup>55</sup> Becoming is therefore not denied, but it is believed by Plato to be a lesser condition affecting the world situated below the eternal and self-sustaining Forms.

Aristotle was critical of Plato's theory of Forms (Copleston 1993, vol.1, p. 292). For him, such theory offers a poor explanation of the principle of change upon which depended the investigation of Nature.<sup>56</sup> Plato's theory was accused of being merely a doubling of the visible things posing problem in the first place. Multiplying existing entities did not provide, in Aristotle's opinion, an answer to the question of why there are multiple things to begin with. Furthermore, Plato's theory of Forms was accused of teaching us nothing of the things we find in the world, for they are not even of the same substance whose transformation is precisely what we must explain. It neither answers the question if objects may exist apart from sensible things while containing their very essences; nor does it explain the movement of all things, and why they are passing away. Aristotle's original contribution to the problem of change or movement was to suggest that only the individual could be predicated with existence, while the individual was also believed to contain the universal observed by Plato, not from a transcendental standpoint however, but from an immanent one (i.e. concrete universal). For Aristotle, the universal would exist only in the particular, which does not mean that we are unable to make the universal an object of science. Quite the contrary, it means that we cannot seize the universal except through apprehension of the particular (Copleston 1993, vol. 1, p. 394). Not satisfied by Plato's theory of imitation, Aristotle explains change through

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<sup>54</sup> For Plato's account of the Demiurge, see *Timaeus*, 40-41 (Plato 2000).

<sup>55</sup> On Platon's notion of transcendental Good, see *Symposium* 210 e 1-212 a7 (Plato 2004a).

<sup>56</sup> For Aristotle's critique of Plato's doctrine of Forms, see Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 990-992.

a combination of potentiality, act and privation. Basically, “matter”, as the individualizing receptacle of potentiality, minus privation (its lack), and under the action of some efficient cause (not necessarily exterior), receives a new degree of actualization (see Aristotle’s *Physics* 3.2, 201b33-35).

The drive toward actualization would be geared ultimately toward the First Immovable Mover (as the ultimate final cause), which is not the Creator-God outside Nature we find in monotheistic religions. In Aristotle’s cosmology, the First Immovable Mover *forms* the world; it does not *create* the world (which, for Aristotle, exists from all eternity). Hence, the problem of necessity, contingency and impossibility of being is not framed by the existentialist\essentialist ontology we later find with the emergence of monotheistic theologies, repositioning the “necessary being in itself” as an exterior creator of existence.

## 7. The Medieval Pass: From Nature to God

The question of ontology took a distinctive turn during the Middle Ages. In that period, ontological issues were framed in theological terms largely absent from the original work of Ancient philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato. Many Fathers of the Church were in fact Neo-Platonist converts (for example Augustine or Pseudo-Dionysius), who imported into Christianity not only their own dissatisfactions with Greek philosophy, but also concerns evolving within it about personal salvation. The works of Plato, neo-Platonists such as Plotinus, and (at a later stage) Aristotle were assimilated by Jewish, Islamic and Christian medieval thinkers who were concerned about theological questions, such as proving the existence of God. The project of investigating Nature for its own sake was subordinated to the task of knowing and serving God. Breaking from cosmological conceptions that placed humans and even the gods *inside* Nature, the rise of monotheistic religions transformed the

relationship between humans and Nature through the twin notions of a personal Divinity transcending Nature and of humans, fallen from Grace, seeking immortal life in a celestial paradise. Humans were no longer viewed as in symbiosis with Nature, in cycles of birth and death, but instead as predestined for something much greater or worse. They were to have mastery on Earth, under the watchful eye of God. Whether they achieved eternal life in heaven depended on how they interacted with one another and with God, not on how they dealt with Nature as such. The element of transcendentalism informing the Greek quest to know the first principles of Nature was transformed into an article of faith, subordinating all possible knowledge to the ultimate task of redeeming one's soul. Freedom became less a matter of the collective self-determining empowerment associated with the Greek *polis* (especially Athens), than a quest for personal redemption through conversion and spiritual discipline. At best, Nature was regarded as revealing *imperfectly* the existence of God. No longer viewed as sacred, eternal, or the house of Gods, Nature was now depicted as the creation of God, bound by the will of God and under the command of the descendants of Adam, humans.<sup>57</sup>

The main preoccupation for the adherents of the monotheistic faiths was to harmonize their theological considerations with previous ontological accounts put forward by pagan scholars. Tensions between medieval partisans of Neo-Platonism and Aristotelianism and other theologians suspicious of anything pagan were frequent. Even amongst the partisans of Aristotle's metaphysics, tensions and disagreements were common: for instance, around the status of God within such system. The conception of God as radically exterior to His creation generated different debates in terms of the precedence of essence and existence and the possibility of explaining God rationally (or metaphysically).

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<sup>57</sup> *Genesis*, 1, 28-30.

Islamic philosopher Avicenna, for example, held that God's essence is its own existence by virtue of necessity, while all other beings are preceded by their essences (Avicenna 2005).<sup>58</sup> Paradoxically, Avicenna's position on the necessity of God's existence as Creator implies that God Himself is determined to create the world, suggesting that he had no free will to do so. Averroes, on the contrary, argued that existence precedes essence, and, inspired by Aristotle, argued that God's existence can be demonstrated metaphysically. Aristotle's influence on Averroes led him to reject the principle of personal resurrection, among other things.<sup>59</sup> For Averroes, the rational part of the soul is eternal rather than immortal and created; thus, it is consubstantial with God and in no need of resurrection. Averroes is also famous for subordinating theology to a rationalistic treatment of metaphysics regarded as superior to religious fables destined for mere commoners. Opposing Averroes, we find Duns Scotus arguing that God is a sort of being only known *a posteriori* by metaphysicians, who can only be studied indirectly by them (*Ox, Prol.*, 4, no 20; *De Primo Principio*, 4, 34-36).<sup>60</sup> Duns Scotus argued that Aristotle's First Unmoved Mover tells us nothing about the leap we need to take from the series of Aristotle's deductions about movement to the spiritual existence of the Creator of all beings in three Persons (*Ox, I, I, 2, no.2*).<sup>61</sup> Among the paradoxical positions assumed by Scotus, we find a conception of a world not eternal but created out of

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<sup>58</sup> For an excellent study on Islamic medieval philosophy, see Davidson, H. A. 1992. *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on intellect: their cosmologies, theories of the active intellect, and theories of human intellect*. New York: Oxford University Press. For a thorough account of Avicenna's metaphysical doctrine, see Avicenna. 1985. *Avicenna's Metaphysics*. 2 volumes. Traduit de l'arabe par Georges C. Anawati. Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin. See also book two, chapter 1 in Avicenna. 2005. *The Metaphysics of the Healing*. A parallel English-Arabic text translated, introduced and annotated by Michael E. Marmura - Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press.

<sup>59</sup> Averroes. 1982. *The epistle on the possibility of conjunction with the active intellect*. Bland, Kalman P. (ed.) New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted by Copleston 1993, tome 2, p. 518. See also, Averroes, M. 1914. *Commentaria Oxoniensia ad IV. libros magistri Sententiarum*. Ad Claras Aquas (Quaracchi) prope Florentiam: ex typ. Collegii s. Bonaventurae; Duns Scotus, John. 1982. *A treatise on God as first principle: a Latin text and English translation of the De primo principio*. 2nd ed., rev., with a commentary by J., Wolter, A. Bernard. Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press.

<sup>61</sup> Scotus, John. 1912-14. *Commentaria Oxoniensia ad IV. libros magistri Sententiarum*. Ad Claras Aquas (Quaracchi) prope Florentiam: ex typ. Collegii s. Bonaventurae.

nothingness: a state of *nihil* which can only be posited as logically, rather than temporally prior to Being, for nothingness cannot precede the existence of God which is also Being. We also find the conception of a God that loves and wills itself, but is neither determined nor free to do so; and the no less paradoxical account of the relation between God and His creation, which can neither be necessary (for that would make God determined by the act of creation) nor accidental (for God's existence cannot be contaminated by any contingency) (Wolter 1987).

Aquinas tried to solve these theological puzzles by suggesting that essence and existence come together in created beings. For Aquinas, existence is not a state of essence, but rather that by which essence is actualised (Copleston 1993, vol. 2, p. 335). Hence, essence and existence cannot be separate in our experience. Aquinas concludes that, because created beings have their actuality apart from their existence, we must assume that there is a Being which is the source of finite existence without being itself a finite being: namely, a being whose existence is its very essence. (Aquinas 1952, *De Potentia*, 7, 2 ad 9). An interesting problem still haunting Aquinas, however, was to reconcile God's simple nature with the different attributes we recognize in Him (the most Merciful, Just, so on). Because they are not exterior qualities mixed with God, but descriptions of His very essence\existence, how can we speak of God having different but sometimes conflicting qualities? Aquinas' solution consists in making a distinction between the imperfect human language and the simple nature of God. In sum, our knowledge would be inadequate and imperfect (yet not false) in relation to understanding God's perfect and simple nature (Aquinas, *ST*, 1990, Ia 13, 12). But then the obvious question follows: why bother making any of these distinctions between essence and existence if such knowledge is necessarily inadequate to understand God?

The point here is not to study in detail the theological positions of each theologian mentioned above, but to exemplify the various tensions, difficulties, paradoxes and non-senses that have generated the various attempts to harmonize Ancient cosmologies with a monotheistic doctrine of Creation. We can clearly see in the problems debated by medieval theologians a paradigmatic shift marked by a loss of faith in human reason, the seeds of a dualistic understanding of Nature (perceived as an inferior realm), and a nominalist shift to deal with the difficulties of the ontological distinction between essence\existence, which, in many ways, still informs our views about Nature, including the predominant cosmological view of a single point of origin for the Creation of the Universe (i.e. the Big Bang) and the need to conduct empirical experimentation because the product of Reason alone could no longer be trusted (announcing here the modern endeavour toward experimentalism and induction, and even some elements found in postmodernist nominalism and irrationalism, dwelling on historicism and finitude as *universal* ontological conditions to argue that our concepts of rationality and subjectivity are merely constructed).

Now at the source of all these conflicting views and paradoxes lies a common difficulty. The Islamic, Jewish and Christian interpretations of Ancient metaphysics had to deal with the delicate task of formulating ontological doctrines without the Pagan assurance of the contiguity nature between reality and rationality found in the Greek *Logos*. Moving away from the problem of movement and change, the ontological problem became one of the participation of immaterial and material causes in the framework of a created world (or substance). Deepening the epistemological divide inherited by the Greeks between what really exists and what are only appearances, opinions or conventions (Parmenides, Plato and Aristotle), the problem of ontology became one of knowing reality from the standpoint of a human rationality believed to be fallible and finite. The problem of universals is a telling

example of the problems occasioned by attempts to harmonize the philosophical heritage of the Ancients with monotheistic dogmas. We find medieval scholars arguing that universals must either have a concrete existence or be the outcome of attributing *nominally* a similar quality to different existing beings: a position which assumed by extension that only individual entities could be predicated with existence (i.e. Roselin, Abelard and Aquinas). The implications of this problem may seem trivial to us, but this problem was threatening to many of the dogmas of monotheistic religion. To take only one obvious example, original sin was believed to be transmitted via the fault of Adam to all humankind, which seems at odds with individuality of existence that follows from the doctrine of Aristotle. Refusing this implication, however, led to the equally unacceptable alternative that God was responsible for infecting every new born child with this sin when created *ex nihilo* (Copleston 1993, vol. 2, p. 141). As we can see, ontological investigations during the medieval period were mostly subsumed under theological considerations. The censorious tone that characterizes this period can be explained, in part, by the fact that the teachings of Plato and Aristotle which fascinated so many medieval scholars were not always compatible with the dogmas of monotheistic theology. The pagan notion that matter was eternal and not created (hence contradicting monotheistic cosmologies), the epistemological conception of a divine *Logos* rising above contingencies (hence contradicting the dogma of divine providence), and the belief that the rational soul was eternal (thus contradicting the conception of personal and physical resurrection, and the supremacy of dogmatic faith) are only a few examples of the sensitive topics inherited from Ancient philosophy that had to be reconstructed to accommodate monotheistic theologies.

The rise and dissemination of monotheistic theologies had at least two important consequences for the problem of ontology I shall examine in greater detail in the next

chapters. First, the monotheistic doctrines of Creation brought together the notions of existence and temporality under the act of Creation which marks the beginning of all beginnings. Nature is now conceived in terms of Creation that ought to be explained by something prior and exterior to it. Second, the confidence in our capacity to deduce or define the first principles of Nature thanks to the consubstantiality of the *Logos* and the Cosmos has been irrevocably altered by the logical implications of monotheistic theologies. Because we are part of a creation, which is subsumed under the will of God; and because creation is necessarily imperfect, finite and contingent vis-à-vis its Creator, it is assumed that our created rational faculties cannot possibly pretend to know the principles which ordain the will of God. From now on, absolute certainty will be out of reach for our finite, contingent and isolated rationality. By planting God and the source of Truth outside Creation, the experience of a fallen, finite and contingent rationality can only mirror itself in the horizon of constant changes and events, described by Heidegger as the “incessant-otherness,” where the power of Grand synthesis is irrevocably traded for a science of what is left: the particulars and the facts (Heidegger 1977, p. 120).

Thinkers of the Renaissance period (1433–1617) inherited the problem and disputes about harmonizing ancient metaphysics with monotheistic doctrines of Creation. In the fourteenth century, however, a number of thinkers began to question the validity of the logical proofs which theologians had accepted as valid evidence for the preambles of faith (Copleston 1993, vol. 3, p. 419). This led to a progressive separation between philosophy and theology, mediated by the greater importance attributed to the logical treatment of theological arguments. With the translation and broader diffusion of texts from Ancient mathematicians and physicists (helped among other things by the invention of the printing press in 1440), the knowledge of Ancient philosophy expanded significantly beyond Plato’s and Aristotle’s

medieval commentaries. The Renaissance period was marked by a revival of Scepticism (Montaigne), Stoicism (Justus Lipsius), and Epicureanism (Gassendi) among others, leading to various and often original conceptions of Nature.<sup>62</sup> Involving astronomy, alchemy and astrology, provocative works and new cosmologies emerged, such as Giordano Bruno's idea of a divine immanence found in Nature (*Natura Naturans*) and a pluralist conception of the universe constituted of multiple solar systems in a limitless space, or the critique of Aristotle's account of movement by Albert of Saxony, proposing a theory of *impetus* which foreshadows the 17<sup>th</sup> century mechanistic theories of Nature.<sup>63</sup>

Innovations took the form not only of new theories, but also of new discoveries in anatomy, medicine, astronomy and kinematics which often contradicted the traditional accounts endorsed by the religious authorities (such as Galen, Hippocrates and Aristotle).<sup>64</sup> Galileo is perhaps the best known exponent of both the experimental method and the modern belief that Nature is essentially mathematical (or geometrical). His research in hydrostatics and mechanics and his inventions, which included the thermometer and the use and amelioration of the telescope, contributed not only to the reliability of the experimental method, but, more importantly, to the refutation of the scholastic appropriation of Aristotle's physics by proving *via facts and experiment* that mathematized laws about movement were possible (Koyré 1968, p. 39). For Aristotelians, movement was essentially a teleological process linked with a

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<sup>62</sup> On Montaigne's skepticism, see Brush, Craig Balcombe. 1966. *Montaigne and Bayle: Variations on the theme of skepticism*. The Hague: M. Nijhoff; on Lipsius' neo-stoicism, see Saunders, Jason L. 1955. *Justus Lipsius: The Philosophy of Renaissance Stoicism*. New York: Liberal Arts Press; on Gassendi's Epicureanism, see Sarasohn, Lisa. 1996. *Gassendi's Ethics: Freedom in Mechanistic Universe*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

<sup>63</sup> See Bruno, Giordano. 1998. *Cause, Principle, Unity (De la causa, principio e uno)*. Richard J. (ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. On the topic of magic and alchemy during the Renaissance, see Zambelli, P. 2007. *White magic Black magic in the European Renaissance: [from Ficino, Pico, Della Porta to Trithemius, Agrippa, Bruno]*. Leiden: Brill; and Beitchman, P. 1998. *Alchemy of the word: cabala of the Renaissance*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

<sup>64</sup> On discoveries in anatomy during the Renaissance see Tarshis, J. 1969. *Andreas Vesalius: father of modern anatomy*. New York: Dial Press; and Cassirer, E. 1943. *The place of Vesalius in the culture of the Renaissance*. New Haven, Conn.: Printed by the Tuttle, Morehouse & Taylor Company. For an account of the practices of medicine during the Renaissance, see Siraisi, N. G. 1990. *Medieval & early Renaissance medicine: an introduction to knowledge and practice*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

qualitative appreciation of the object being moved or at rest (according to their natural tendencies). Mathematics was believed not suitable for the study of physics or movement, assumed to be of a contingent and accidental Nature irreducible to mathematical demonstrations (which could only be applied to the study of heavenly bodies). Galileo's demonstration that objects fall at the same rate whatever their mass refuted such a static conception of order, proving by the same token that the body is completely indifferent to being in movement or at rest. The movement of a body came to be perceived only in relation to another body perceived as still (Koyré 1968, p. 33). Moreover, his discovery of the moons orbiting around Jupiter contradicted Aristotle's theory that all celestial bodies should revolve around the Earth, and his observations of the gibbous and full phases of Venus contributed to refuting the geocentric Ptolemaic theory endorsed by the Church, confirming experimentally Copernicus' comprehensive heliocentric cosmology.<sup>65</sup>

Alongside these troubling discoveries, natural theology also had to deal with the dissemination of the "nominalist spirit" and renewed forms of scepticism best expressed by the influential work of Montaigne (1533-92). The nominalist spirit, according to Frederick Copleston, is a disposition inclined toward "analysis rather than to synthesis, and to criticism rather than to speculation," with the consequence of leaving "faith hanging in the air, without (so far as philosophy is concerned) any rational basis" (Copleston 1993, vol. 3, p. 11). While not plainly abandoned, metaphysics tended to move toward the exploration of logical analysis, bringing an increasing distance between rational and theological argumentation, with the consequence of relegating the question of God's existence to faith alone. This split between rational and theological arguments encouraged the rise of a movement toward speculative mysticism on the one hand (i.e. Meister Eckhart), and the rise of an Ockhamist movement on

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<sup>65</sup> On Galileo confirmation of Copernicus's cosmology, see Morphet, C. 1977. *Galileo and Copernican astronomy: a scientific world view defined*. London: Butterworths.

the other, which emphasized not only independent logical rigor, but also insisted on the primacy of intuition based strictly on the apprehension of individual things, and the study of causal relations between regular sequences. But scholastic metaphysicians met perhaps an even tougher challenge with Montaigne's renewed Pyrronism asserting that the mind is dependent on sense-experience, that sense-experiences are relative and unreliable, and that consequently we cannot attain any absolute truth (Copleston 1993, vol. 4, p. 19). In short, Montaigne was denying the possibility that we could construct any reliable metaphysical system, an argument he illustrated by the fact that metaphysicians often arrived at different and incompatible conclusions. In sum, the whole project of metaphysics was being discarded.

#### 8. The Twilight of Scholastic Ontology

Early modern attempts to renew metaphysics were certainly responding to the stimulation of the new discoveries in kinetics, physics and astronomy offered to the scholastic explanations of Nature. But they were equally preoccupied by the challenges posed by radical scepticism, eager to lay the new foundations by which we could explain Nature *in toto*. Armed with a confidence in the capacity of mathematics *and* experimental methodology, new metaphysical systems and natural philosophies gradually emerged around the common belief that by using the right method, metaphysical philosophy (and even ethics) could become an exact science in the image of mathematics. In contrast to scholastic philosophers who already believed in the existence of self-evident principles, the hope was for a fresh start under the guidance of the right method of investigation, informed by the inputs of scepticism combined with mathematical reasoning to deduce the necessary truths which would give us *concrete*, *applicable* and *cumulative* information about Nature.

Francis Bacon (1561–1626) is perhaps one of the best representatives of these hopes. In his major work *Novum Organum*, Bacon argues that the traditional inquest into the final causes (or purposes) of Nature is useless.<sup>66</sup> He furthermore argues that Forms, as abstract natural kinds, do not exist. Metaphysics is here reduced to the study of the formal causes or the general laws (or principles) by which natural events may be understood in a productive manner. In short, Bacon denounced metaphysical entities as fictional. To the Aristotelian notion of deduction, Bacon favours the systematic elimination of non conclusive experiences in order to produce a more robust knowledge of Nature oriented toward concrete control over our natural environment (Gaukroger 2006, p. 166). *Contra Aristotle*, Bacon objects to the conception of a natural philosophy devoted to understanding things by understanding their Nature: that is, by privileging the study of the internal movements by which a being goes toward its intrinsic finality. On the contrary, Bacon holds that it is the “violent movements” which Aristotle discarded as unpredictable accidents that we should consider. Bacon situates the causes of movement at a mechanic and corpuscular level; they are the microscopic parts whose distribution and behaviours would explain the macroscopic features of bodies, without reference to some Grand and strange First Unmoved Mover (Gaukroger 2006, p. 361). In sum, what empowers humans (according to Bacon) are not sterile discussions about the intrinsic nature of things, but the ability to understand the connection between parts and the movements they can produce.

René Descartes (1596–1650) also denied that explanations in terms of final cause are necessary in the sciences. Moving away from an understanding of metaphysics as a science of being *qua* being, Descartes’ metaphysical meditations concern the conditions that guide human knowledge toward certainty and clarity. At the core of Descartes’ work we find (A) the

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<sup>66</sup> See Bacon, Francis, 2000. *The New Organon*. Edited by Lisa Jardine, Michael Silverthorne. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Book 1, propositions XLVIII, p. 44.

belief that God is completely exterior to its creation, (B) the proposition that philosophy ought to start with the meditations of the self-reflecting ego, (C) and the suggestion that there are two basic substances with independent existence: *mind* (the essence of which is thought) and *matter* (as extension considered apart from motion, time and energy). For Descartes, the scholastic notion of final cause (which explains for instance that the natural tendency of a stone is to fall to the ground) results from attributing a mental or cognitive quality to a physical object. The realm of thought and matter must therefore be carefully distinguished by following the right method, which, for Descartes, emphasizes the supremacy of clear, ordered and distinct ideas accessible only after exercising a methodological doubt purging prejudices and false opinions. Descartes' dualistic and mechanistic metaphysics operates from deductive assumptions based on his definition of matter as extension, and movement as local motion. This allows him to produce a powerful vision along the formulation of a mechanical theory of everything (including the living beings), in which the principle of causality is understood mechanically.

However, despite their various formulations, modern attempts to save metaphysics were still at a stalemate, incapable of producing the basis for a progressive and unified knowledge that could provide the knowledge of what was deemed as crucial: the concrete mastery of reality. On the one hand, Bacon's theory on the "false idols of the mind" did not provide in itself any guarantee for the accumulation of concrete knowledge. Bacon's speculative parallelism between the micro and macro that informed his theory of matter was no more demonstrated from an experimental standpoint than Aristotle's metaphysical system. Descartes' *cogito* may have produced a form of certainty on the basis of Man's rational powers alone, but the concrete mastery of reality was still to be demonstrated.<sup>67</sup> In the wake of Copernicus, Kepler,

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<sup>67</sup> Descartes' *Dubito* and its solution found in the *Cogito* articulate a new sense of ontological certainty placing Man at its very center. The ontological proof that "I" exists, and furthermore that God exists (because of the idea

and Galileo, the powerful idea that Nature could be conquered following the right method, that such a method could harness Nature with new technologies, and that certainty could be reached by reason alone, surely contributed to set new standards of cognitive success. But no Grand theories of Nature, even fashionable corpuscularianism and mechanism, were able to save metaphysics from profound difficulties. The project of elaborating a modern metaphysic was still experiencing profound difficulties. For example, complex or “mixed” phenomena, such as the perception of color, could not be explained with total satisfaction by mechanistic accounts (Gaukroger 2006, p. 397). And, despite their insights into quantifying the micro level or reality, thinkers like Beeckman, Hobbes and Descartes were incapable of translating such micro framework to macroscopic empirical events (Gaukroger 2006, pp.397-400). Even the last attempt by Kant to rescue the concept of *a priori* only served to fortify the very limit which all future metaphysics could not transgress: the limit of experience itself.<sup>68</sup> Despite Kant’s attempt to invert the problem of metaphysics by assuming that objects ought to conform to our cognition rather than to external reality, Kant was only capable of saving the so-called forms or categories of pure experience (space and time) as *a priori* laws governing all objects of experience at the cost of ascribing them solely to those objects *we* can experience. Of course, it can be said that Kant rescued the traditional metaphysical division between form and matter (*form* as an *a priori* feature of experience that our mind imposes on matter through cognition); but by themselves, these concepts could not produce any cumulative or new knowledge about the world.

It took the combination of experimental natural philosophy and mathematical speculation to overcome the persistent metaphysical belief that a physical account of something needed to be

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in perfection in Man that cannot come from the imperfect being) are found in a thought experiment in which at the very time that I doubt about everything there is, I cannot doubt that, while doubting, I am nonetheless thinking: we could therefore be certain of being minimally “thinking things.” From this thought experiment, the *Cogito*, Descartes concludes that the essence of mind is thought.

<sup>68</sup> See Weldon, T. D. 1964. *Kant's Critique of pure reason*. 2d ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

investigated along the lines of what is changing and what has an independent existence. Only then did it become possible to trade the ontological question of “what is” for the formulation of mathematized and demonstrable laws showing “how does it work”. Galileo’s system of dynamics, later completed by Newton in 1687, made such criteria of cognitive success irreversible. Replacing the geometrical conception that attempted to explain the movement of planets, we were finally presented with a full dynamics explaining *how* the motion of each body accelerated *in toto*. Newton’s laws, together with the laws of force (such as the inverse square law of gravitation), provided a reliable, accurate and unified account for the motion of bodies both in heavens and on Earth (Penrose 1992, p. 124). All these experimental discoveries contributed to a renewed confidence in humankind’s rational abilities to gain progressive and concrete power over Nature. But such knowledge was not delivered by metaphysics; rather it was delivered via the establishment of a new physics. From Newton onward, what Penrose summarizes as the faith in a profound harmony between mathematics and the workings of the natural world became gradually the accepted paradigm for the formulation of new theories, whose level of complexity and implications are hard to describe for anyone lacking expert training in modern physics. How Newtonian dynamics were adjoined to Maxwell’s electromagnetic theories, leading to special relativity, followed by Einstein’s general relativity theory concerning the effects of intense gravitational activities, followed by the Second Law of thermodynamics at the source of different hypotheses regarding the Big Bang, paralleled by research in quantum mechanics and quantum electrodynamics, means close to nothing for commoners untrained in modern physics (Penrose 1992). Suffice it here to say that the direction taken by these discoveries made by modern physics confirms the status of a dream that had to be sacrificed to the task: modern physics never delivered a unitary vision of Nature as home for a new ethics. It surely

augmented our capacities to influence and control our surroundings, but not our wisdom to know why we should act or not according to those newly gained capacities.

On the political level, we can find a parallel trajectory from the emergence of a new political metaphysics invoking Nature as a pre-political state explaining politics as the outcome of an artificial decision, to the rise of managerial mode of control in no need of external or meta-explanations. The emergence of diverse natural philosophies influenced by mechanistic accounts of reality played a predominant role in reformulating the legitimacy of political order. Hypothetical “states of Nature” and the notion of some original contract between individuals (envisioned as atomic agents) to enter society (or the state) were articulated to assert the necessity to have absolutist government (Hobbes), to resist tyrannical government (Locke), or to understand the legitimacy of government in terms of the will of the people (Rousseau). Of course, not everybody agreed about the hypothesis of a social contract (either as enforcing or limiting political power). David Hume, for instance, provided a psychological and historical account of the emergence of the idea of a social contract as a convenient fiction to ensure political order, while rejecting the principle of causation in theories of knowledge as subjective associations based on inductive reasoning.<sup>69</sup> Others contested the triumph of rationalism, the supremacy of logical reasoning and the ideal of universal and cosmopolitan progress, insisting on the inputs of feelings, cultural relativism and the unity of Nature and history (Herder, Jacobi, Hamman). Others simply stopped using foundational arguments or Grand philosophical systematizations altogether, arguing in favour of quantified criteria such as social utility and the greater happiness for the greatest number to organize human societies and help us ponder difficult decisions (Claude Helvetius, Bentham, James Mill). Just as science could study Nature without endorsing any Grand ontological speculation, political or

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<sup>69</sup> See “Of the Original Contract” in Hume, David. 1987. *Essays, Moral, Political, And Literary*. Rev. ed. by Eugene F. Miller. Indianapolis: LibertyClassics.

social sciences could do just the same by “mathematicizing” the object of its enquiries (peoples and objects as resources) through statistics and other predictive methods of calculation targeting human behaviour directly.

Experimental philosophy and its corollary found in the birth of social sciences could finally take their leave from theology and abstruse metaphysical speculation. Or so we think. For what made the renewed attempts at natural philosophy so interesting to many thinkers of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, especially in England, were the prospects it presented for the renewal of natural theology on the grounds that it could inspire humility and awe in the face of the wonders of the Creation (Gaukroger 2006, pp. 23-29), not to mention the inputs of Puritan ethics in legitimating the study of Nature (Westfall 1992). In retrospect, it can be said that the difficulty arose for natural theology not so much from its failure to produce a robust natural theology derived from Aristotle’s metaphysics, but from an historical understanding, first of the Bible, second of Christianity as a whole, which exposed historical claims made by Christianity to the scrutiny of other positive and contradictory findings. The tensions between theology and natural sciences were mostly the result of the former endeavour to create a robust natural theology credible from an historical and scientific standpoint. This endeavour is mostly responsible for the gradual reversal of the method of verification by which the Bible was the ultimate criterion for the validity of a scientific discovery; now the Bible was judged according to historico-scientific criteria.

As Gaukroger suggests, the conception of a “scientific culture” free at last from theological influence, adopting an adversarial paradigm only for the sake of the pursuit of truth, and leading humanity toward technological progress should be greatly nuanced (2006). First, the mechanical, atomistic or mathematic representation of Nature did not kill the idea that God

created Nature. Robert Boyle was indeed convinced of the dogma of divine creation, as were Newton, Descartes, Leibniz and many other influential figures associated with the Scientific Revolution. It was often believed that God, as Creator of Nature, secured the parallelism between mathematical deductions, experiments and the actual system of Nature. Second, the creation of a “neutral space” of enquiries was not the outcome of modern scientific work alone; rather the emergence of such space was also the result of external influences, such as Gratian’s codification of the canon law around 1140, which, by harmonizing various legal traditions, shaped a new juridical culture that opened a “neutral space” for disputation, innovation and argument (Gaukroger 2006, p. 34). By establishing corporate bodies on its own model (cities, guilds, universities), the codification of the law helped to create a form of decentralization by which autonomous spheres of professional and civic activity could boast innovation and free inquiries under a protected *aegis*.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, when it comes to the question of truth, the motivation behind the emergent scientific *ethos* was less the pursuit of truth *per se*, than a pursuit of what is useful and can endow human life with new discoveries and power (Gaukroger 2006, p. 39).

The fact is that the Scientific Revolution of the 17<sup>th</sup> century produced very little of the technical progress by which its opening legacy has often been celebrated. Ballistics, reliable clockwork, architecture, naval construction rarely resulted from the work of professional mathematicians. Pioneers and inventors behind the Industrial Revolution were rarely professional scientists themselves.<sup>71</sup> In fact, the adoption of history as the leading paradigm

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<sup>70</sup> The idea that university did provide a safe heaven for free scientific enquiry should however be moderated. Patronage and non-academic positions played a significant role in providing the means for innovative research which couldn’t often set foot in university because they did not teach the “right” things (Gaukroger 2006, p. 35).

<sup>71</sup> As Peter Mathias put it: “By and large, innovations were not the result of the formal application of applied science, nor the product of the formal educational system of the country...Most innovations were the products of inspired amateurs, or brilliant artisans trained as clockmakers, millwrights, blacksmiths or in the Birmingham trades...They were mainly local men, empirically trained, with local horizons, often very interested in things scientific, aware men, responding directly to a particular problem” (quoted in Gaukroger 2006, p. 41).

for understanding the accumulation of positive knowledge, and the inputs of Darwin's evolutionary theory did more damage to scholastic metaphysics than the gradual mathematization of Nature from the Renaissance period onward.

Darwin provided a devastating alternative which basically undermined the need to explain organic adaptation and the biological differences observed in Nature from the standpoint of a design theory or any other grand teleological explanations (although Darwin did not refute theism *per se*). Darwin achieved this by repositioning the concept of teleology in materialistic and predominantly individualistic terms (Sober 1992, pp. 98-103). For Darwin, not only was the idea of teleology completely refocused, but no overall or pre-existing harmony could be deduced from his scientific findings. In Darwin's view, the human species is no longer central to explaining the purposes of Nature; the Lamarckian idea of a Nature positioning the human species (and its rational attributes) above all other species is completely obsolete for Darwin.

Here Nature is no longer conceived as an agent. Rather the *contingent* natural processes of selection operate at the level of individuals in relation to a milieu through time, which, by transmitting their adaptive qualities, shape the outer aspect of species no longer viewed in static and essentialist terms. The Aristotelian logic which sees the individual's particularities as mere accident of a universal and teleological Nature is completely turned on its head. After Darwin, the individual's particularities (seen as adaptive markers) are precisely what define a species in its dynamic evolution, which is not preset by any finality but rather contingent on what the individuals are transmitting to their offspring(s). Even if we suppose that God is the Creator of all what Darwin is describing, Darwin's research made such a hypothesis not only unnecessary for conducting his enquiries, but even problematic if we understand that struggle

and the blind elimination of the weakest elements are the driving forces behind natural selection and so-called evolution.

## 9. Discussion and Conclusion

Many other remarks and clarifications could be added regarding what I have described as the “twilight of scholastic ontology.” But if we must focus on the concept of Nature, then, we can assert that the so-called Scientific Revolution inaugurated a new approach formulated in quantified, individualizing, mechanized, and often secularized terms (Westfall 1992, p. 65). The seventeenth century Scientific Revolution helped to shape a conception of knowledge by which natural events could be measured, controlled, and predicted. The importance of such a worldview cannot be overstated. As Westfall argues, “[a]lthough it has been modified greatly in its details in the intervening three centuries, it is still with us, the very foundation of the intellectual life in the West and increasingly in the whole world” (1992, p. 86). Springing from such a worldview, the problem of knowing Nature shifted from the description of a metaphysical entity, an organized design, to the task of apprehending what can be analysed, measured and predicted along the criteria of what can be directly useful and controlled.

From such a resolutely scientific perspective, ontology and metaphysics are no longer essential to the pursuit of knowledge: “serious” scientific research is reputed to have kicked the ontological ladder from under itself a long time ago. The deductive quest of knowing being *qua* being has been progressively replaced by combinations of empirical and mathematical enquiries focusing on *how* (not *why*) the universe behaves the way it does. New criteria of cognitive success have been formulated in accordance with the multiplication of “practical spheres” perceived as being so heterogeneous and specialised that no transcendent principle or overarching authoritative source of evaluation is conceived capable of generating

a common vision of the world (Angus 1983, p.162). Not only is Earth no longer viewed as the center of the Universe, and the sun as no longer the only (or most important) sun out there, but Nature itself, after Darwin, seems indifferent to the place human species occupies in the “tree of Life.” Nature itself, as a metaphysical entity, or worse as an agent, became a meaningless superstition, accelerating what is described by Max Weber and Critical Theorists Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse as the “disenchantment” of Nature according to the supremacy of instrumental rationality (Weber 1964, p. 117 quoted in Angus 1983, p. 145; Adorno and Horkheimer 2008; Marcuse 2008).

By making the knowledge of Nature accessible through separated disciplines increasingly disconnected from ethical considerations (through the consecration of the fact\value dichotomy), the Scientific Revolution has played a crucial role in legitimating the instrumental reason which Max Weber describes as the crux of modernity and its cultural correlate: namely, “the recognition that in the face of science ‘the ultimate and sublime values have retreated from public life,’” with its corollary that politics becomes increasingly a simple technical exercise (Weber 1948, p. 155; quoted in Owen 1994, p. 90). Rising from a condemnation of “the power of the universal over the particular,” that is “to the ubiquity of the subjection of the individual to the whole of human society”, we would have entered into an Age celebrating the supremacy of the “subjective reason” over the “objective reason”; a subjective reason that “does not ask whether ends are intrinsically rational, but only how means may be fashioned to achieve whatever ends may be selected, defining “the rational as that which is serviceable for human interest” (Leiss 2008).<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Objective reason is described by Leiss as perceiving human reason as part of the rationality of the world, and would regard the highest expression of reason (truth) as an ontological category (truth as grasping the essence of things); subjective reason, on the other hand, would exclusively seek “mastery over things and does not attempt to consider what extrahuman things may be in and for themselves” (Leiss 2008, pp. 73-74).

The ecological consequences associated with the emergence and supremacy of this paradigm are significant. As our chapter has illustrated, the disenchantment of Nature through its objectification and its gradual dissolution within the current positivist *and* historicist paradigm find their roots in previous cosmologies and metaphysics which first posited the world in terms of a hierarchical divide between abstract principles (such as essences, First causes or Ideas) versus what would be only mere contingencies and transient states, a hierarchical divide then modulated through a monotheistic and creationist *historicizing* story reframing the problem of Being between the one of essence versus existence, coextensively generating the problem of universals; which, in turn, provoked the rise of analyticity and nominalism as dominant epistemic horizon, positing that existence can only be attributed to what can be individualized and eventually manipulated. Gradually, what became a “Scientific Revolution” through the mathematization and pragmatic orientations of our enquiries of natural phenomena led to the emergence of new criteria for cognitive success, the basis for new forms of social relationships and a new representation of Nature to emerge.

As proposed by the work of Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse (among others), the rise of what they describe as instrumental reason would lead to subtle modes of domination not only between human beings, but also between human beings and Nature. Adorno and Horkheimer identify the domination of what they call the power of “abstraction” with the rise of such a paradigm, which they famously associate with the negative consequences of the Enlightenment and the European industrial revolution. Under the levelling domination of abstraction (which makes everything in nature repeatable), they suggest, and of industry (for which abstraction ordains repetition), freedom itself becomes subjugated to the spirit of mathematization, which, in its increasing positivistic acceptance, becomes a system of detached signs devoid of any intention that would transcend the system itself (Horkheimer

and Adorno 2008). As such, both Nature and the fruit of our social relationships would be increasingly captured and simplified through standardized and calculable formulas geared to increase manipulation, regulation, mastery and control not only of Nature (viewed as a mere resource to be used for the sole benefit of humans), but also of human creativity, talents, imagination and potentiality, turned here in what we could name with Heidegger mere “standing-reserve” (Foltz 1995).

Marcuse weaves this condemnation of abstraction with this idea that the processes by which Nature (and humans) is subjugated to the violence of exploitation and the destruction of pollution is first and foremost an economic *and* political one. Marcuse describes as one of the fundamental functions of civilization this endeavour to change both the nature of human beings and their natural surroundings in order to civilize them (Marcuse 2008): a process which has led the Western civilization through the progressive disenchantment and demythologization of Nature (through the mathematization and historication of our apprehensions of Reality, which both endorse the fact\value distinction) toward the fabrication of humans as both subject and object of this highly mathematized societal organization, namely a market society driven by a expansionist capitalist economy in which human freedom is mainly experienced through acts of consumption commoditised through numeric values and urges for constant renewal.

So one can ask: Exactly how different are the ontological assumptions contained in green governmentality studies, from the subsequent epistemic shifts leading us to the progressive disenchantment of Nature and the supremacy of subjective reason described above? Are these ontological assumptions which posit Nature as a social and historical construct not themselves the products of some specific cultural inflexions, which, last in line, are asserting the

supremacy of subjective reason as described above? If so, exactly how Foucault's politicization of ontology—through his pursuit of what is always an undetermined and undefined freedom—can possibly rescue not only the activity of politics from being reduced to this technical and instrumental management of our freedoms (especially when this technical form of management seems no longer to require the closed framework of any ontology or worldview to operate), but also answers the ecological predation associated with the supremacy of such a disenchanting paradigm? These are the questions our next chapters will investigate more deeply.

## Chapter 4:

### Politicizing Ontology: Between Practices and History

“One can only demand of the teacher that he have the intellectual integrity to see that it is one thing to state the facts, to determine mathematical or logical relations or the internal structure of cultural values, while it is another thing to answer questions of the *value* of the culture and its individual contents and the question of how one should act in the cultural community and in political associations”

Max Weber, *Science as a Vocation*

#### 1. Introduction:

Our last chapter has explored how the notion of governmentality can serve to critically engage the introduction of “Nature” at the center of Western political rationalities. After identifying the ontological assumptions endorsed by most green governmentality scholars, we have discussed the different formulations related with the notion of ontology to better understand the different entries that have shaped the problem of ontology up to its politicization by green governmentality analyses. We have concluded by suggesting that the nominalist and constructivist assumptions we find in such analyses have been produced alongside the rise of modern culture privileging technicity and the supremacy of epistemology over ontology.

This chapter will investigate the concept of ontology to expose the alignment of two ontologies found at the heart of the critical *ethos* assumed by most green governmentality scholars in their attempts to politicize ontology, namely an ontology of *praxis* and an historical ontology which rejects any overarching or normatively-charged concepts of Nature. Taking the work of Thomas R. Gruber and Martin Heidegger as examples, I suggest that the question of ontology is now less a question of knowing Nature, than a question of mere cognitive pragmatics in the first case, or a problematization of the cultures for which the

question of Nature becomes a problem in the second. The third section of this chapter examines the different definitions of “political ontology” offered by Mario Blazer to suggest that the politicization of ontology can be understood not only as an important theoretical shift in political theory, but as an *ethos* which positions politics at the center of ontology, thwarting all attempts to enclose our experience of freedom according to a specific understanding of reality or Nature. I will then conclude by turning the notion of “politicization of ontology” on its head, so to speak, by asking the question: what kind of ontology must be assumed in order to reject any overarching notion or any comprehensive valuing of Nature?

## 2. What Nature?

After so many blows against the possibility of learning anything new from metaphysics or ontology, it is not surprising that questions such as “which entities are fundamental?” or “what can be said to exist?” are relegated to the *history* of philosophy, thus ascribing preoccupations we used to have to the past. As our previous chapter has illustrated, it is now a widely shared assumption that the study of Nature belongs to modern physics or evolutionary biology, whose division into so many branches makes unlikely any grand synthesis over the question of Nature (or Being). Oksala’s warning about the unification of Nature as a political stratagem is therefore hard to pinpoint with precision. We are indeed tempted to ask: what unification? What Nature?

Of course, it is always possible to objectify the so called scientific culture as one historico-cultural production among others, in which case it can be accused of hegemony (Weber 1949, p. 111-113). Ontology can thus be recycled as a study of “applied cultures,” reducing what was once the glorious science of being *qua* being to comparative explorations of what “being” or “Nature” means, mostly for pre or non-scientific cultures. Along these lines, we find

Heinrich Rickert suggesting in *Kulturwissenschaft und Naturwissenschaft* (1921, p. 63) that the reality we perceive “in segmented ways” through its scientific exploration is actually the result of the mode of knowledge we press on the object of our enquiries. Hence, the world becomes “Nature” when examined through a universalistic lens; but becomes “history” when we adopt an approach insisting on the individual and particular (Descola 2005). Rickert’s affirmation making the world “history” when examined through the “particular” is surely interesting, if nothing else for announcing a dominant theme we find in so-called postmodern enquiries, insisting that the relation between the historical and the particular undermines any universalistic pretensions. The same is true for the way in which Rickert frames the classical opposition between the universal and particular through the two gateways of the modern mind: science and history. But the way universalism is associated with science as the maker of Nature by Rickert is somewhat problematic when we know that “modern sciences” no longer need to supply or impose a unitary or universal understanding of Nature. Due to its commitment to epistemology prior to ontology, and its dismissive attitude toward the problem of “valuing values,” it is very unlikely that what we call the modern sciences will ever produce a unitary and universal picture of Nature; in which case adding history as “that” by which no overall synthesis of Nature can be produced only makes any grand synthesis of Nature an even more remote possibility.

It is certainly true that modern physics holds that the laws of physics it asserts are universal; but this is not the same thing than saying that modern physics needs an overall or unitary picture of Nature in order to do so. The fact is that it does not. The strength of modern methods of investigation lies precisely in its rebuttal of any teleological, grand design or unitary vision of Nature that would precede open scientific enquiries. To put it otherwise, the risk of domination attributed to the supremacy of modern physics resides less in the

production of a universal concept of Nature, than in the radical dissolution of all evaluative comprehension of Nature with the propagation of a neutral, value-free and a-cultural method of investigation, itself consolidated with piecemeal discoveries committed to an epistemological principle of falsification and future amendment. The supremacy of modern physics resides in its capacity to reroute the criteria of cognitive success according to a principle of falsification that allows for the possibility of future revisions, introducing a level of contingency which forbids any comprehensive and definitive understanding of what Nature is *in toto*.

Between its scientific and historical treatment (both hostile to ontology as a potential resuscitator of “value rationalities”), one remaining debate appears to be whether ontology or epistemology comes first in our experience of reality. Defending the position that ontology precedes epistemology, Colin Hay argues that any epistemology explicitly or implicitly endorses some ontological presuppositions.<sup>73</sup> For Hay, the knowledge of ontology has direct political implications, warning us that unless “we understand the dependence of contending theoretical perspectives on contested ontological and epistemological assumptions, we fail to appreciate the nature of the substantive controversies their engagement produces. Identifying and stating clearly our ontological and epistemological predicates is thus fundamental to articulating and defending a perspective in political analysis. Others argue to the contrary that

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<sup>73</sup> As Hay declares: “My argument, such as it is, is that no ontologically neutral epistemological claim can be made. In other words, to commit oneself to an epistemology is also to commit oneself to a position on a range of ontological issues. Moreover, as I define these terms, ontological claims logically precede epistemological claims. If, as I suggest, ontology ‘relates to the nature of the social and political world’ and epistemology ‘to what we can know about it’, then ontology is logically prior in the sense that the ‘it’ in the second term (the definition of epistemology) is, and can only be, specified by the first (the definition of ontology). This, I contend, is a point of logic, not of meta-theory” (Hay 2007). James K. Feibleman concurs with this position when he declares that: “Epistemology is dependant upon ontology in the ontological sense. More things have being than are known, and all things that are known have being. This means that all things which have beings (i.e. all being) have ontological aspects, whereas only things which are known (i.e. some things) have epistemological. In other words, all epistemologies have their ontological status, but some ontologies have epistemological status, namely ontologies known. *Epistemology draws a smaller circle within the far wider circle of ontology.*” (1968, p. 528). The emphasis is mine.

epistemological criteria ought to come first if the various conceptions of a world as distinct from its “knowing subjects” are to make any sense (Dixon and Jones III 1998, quoted in Bates in Jenkins, 2007).<sup>74</sup> Again, there is no easy solution to such problems. By historicizing or culturalizing epistemology, we face the problem of relativism and determinism; by holding that our epistemological criteria are not culturally or historically determined, we face the accusation of transcendentalism, or worse ethnocentrism. Adding to an already complicated problem, we also find writers who problematize the distinction between ontology, epistemology and any value systems altogether, as well as the directionality of the ontology/epistemology relationship as a contested area of meta-theory (Bates and Jenkins 2007; Smith 1996; Marsh and Furlong 2002). Ontology, even diluted as “applied culture,” is in fact still a target of predilection not only for various “postmodern” writers who see in ontology a problematic framework which often assumes a dualistic distinction between object\subject to begin with (Derrida), a quest for origins that can never be found (Foucault) or the mother of all logocentrism and the source of some the Grand universalistic narratives (Lyotard), but also for the supporters of analytical philosophy and logical empiricism.

After the so-called Linguistic Turn, the question of ontology was mostly subsumed under the problem of how to relate linguistic and non-linguistic entities (Cornman 1992). The problem of ontology became the one of matching the formalization of linguistic expressions—based on logical truths believed to be self-evident—to extra-linguistic entities; a possibility without

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<sup>74</sup> As Dixon and Jones III phrase it: “ontological assumptions put the cart before the horse, for any ontology is itself grounded in an epistemology about how we know ‘what the world is like’; in other words, the analysis of ontology invariably shows it to rest upon epistemological priors that enable claims about the structure of the real world. For example, the ontological divisions between physical and social phenomena, or between individual agency and sociospatial structure are the result of an epistemology that segments reality and experience in order to comprehend them both. But how do we draw the boundaries of Nature, or, for that matter, of the individual? And when and where did these categories emerge? So much of geography is predicated upon analyzing variables structured upon such dualisms, and yet the categories and their derivatives are not ‘natural’, in any ‘real’ sense, but are the sociohistorical outcomes of representational processes analysis must first begin at the epistemological level” (Dixon and Jones III 1998, p. 250; Quoted in Bates and Jenkins 2007).

which denoting speech acts would be impossible.<sup>75</sup> Based on the distinction between analytical truths (i.e. my uncle is my father's brother) and synthetic truths (i.e. my uncle has brown hair), meaningful statements are deemed either analytic or capable of being verified by experience; all other statements would be meaningless. All other statements would lead to the formulation of pseudo-problems that cannot be rationally solved. This often led logical analysts to discard many traditional problems of philosophy, especially those in metaphysics or ontology, as being futile or meaningless. Philosophers, analytical positivists suggest, ought to restrain themselves from formulating statements about the world that cannot be verified on an empirical basis. Philosophy is therefore assigned the more modest role of clarifying speech acts through the use of formal logic to establish the soundness of philosophical statements according to logical rules assumed as self-evident and independent from the content of our experiences (*e.g.*, the law of non-contradiction, identity and excluded-middle).<sup>76</sup>

The spectre of ontology re-emerges, however, when logical analysts are confronted by the task of articulating and justifying theories of linguistic reference between their formalizations of language and extra-linguistic entities found in the world. In other words, the problem of

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<sup>75</sup> Many ontological interrogations in the history of Western philosophy have been framed either in terms of a search for the irreducible cause for the physical universe (the Alpha purchase), and/or in terms of describing the irreducible conditions of possibility for acts of cognition/language to be made intelligible. Now it is conceivable to many that the interpretations given to various concepts across human history may have changed (hence the need to do a history of concepts that may show their contingency upon culture and relations of power), but it is inconceivable to many that the rules by which we organize our acts of language and cognition would ever change or beg to differ: the principle of non-contradiction, the principle of identity and excluded middle are all perceived as aprioristic and necessary rules for all human acts of language by which we can exchange and verify meaningful information in terms of true/false statements. I here suggest that both the interpretation and the existence of concepts *and* the rules by which they operate are informed by ontological assumptions. I thus sympathise with the position of Colin Hay that ontological assumptions inform not only epistemological assumptions, but also inform methodological choices (Hay 2007, p. 117). The point, however, as Glyn Daly suggests, "is not so much a question of whether ontology is prior to epistemology, or vice versa, as one of trying to see how the ontological and the epistemological are articulated as parts of a characteristic relational whole or paradigm" (Daly 2008, p. 58).

<sup>76</sup> On this interpretation of analyticity, see Hempel (1965). There are also other interpretations of analyticity. For Quine an analytical statement is true only if it conforms to a semantic rule (1960); for Kripke an analytical statement is true only if its meaning is true in all possible worlds (1972); For Achinstein (1968) an analytical and synthetic statements are not mutually-exclusive properties, but rather depend on the usage we made of a statement. To move from an analytical to a synthetic usage, we would only have to ignore temporarily an aspect of a definition and invoke facts to confirm this aspect (Nadeau 1999, pp. 13-14).

ontology re-emerges when the task of formulating and justifying theories of reference can no longer be avoided. That ontology is neither the job of scientists nor logical analysts is however a point that we can concede (Cornman 1992). Since the act of predicating existence to an object following the scientific method is mainly concerned about the measurable repetition of an observable experience by which this predication is made, no commitment to an overarching ontological theory would result from adopting such a method. An ontological commitment would emerge for scientists only when (1) they try to justify a context of verification which expands beyond the narrow scope of their predication of existence in the context of their experience, or (2) when they try to integrate the result of their experiences within the framework of a larger worldview by which their experimentation becomes meaningful (socially, culturally, politically).

In the same way, because logical analysts are mainly concerned with the logical relations among various linguistic expressions, and not with the relations between linguistic expressions and extra-linguistic entities, their preoccupations have little or nothing to do with ontology. An ontological commitment would only emerge when analytical analysts concern themselves with relations of correspondence between linguistic expressions and extra-linguistic entities (i.e. theories of reference) or when they claim that their analyses have extra-linguistic purposes. But to imply that all ontological investigations are futile or meaningless because they invoke “utterances which are neither scientifically verifiable nor analytic” is an argument that can only be made employing some particular theory of reference (i.e. by assuming the existence of a world); and because employing such theory is itself an ontological pursuit, these attempts would ultimately be self-defeating (Cornman 1992). Despite the attempts to discard ontology as a meaningful problem, the problem of accounting for one’s ontological commitments would therefore still be a valid preoccupation.

### 3. Ontological Functionalism and Existentialism

Again, the problem we see emerging is whether epistemology or ontology comes first; more precisely, between the supremacy of an epistemology that conjugates an open-ended and progressive conception of truth according to which the possibility of critical revisions is always a step ahead of our abilities to apprehend the whole Truth; or the supremacy of ontology understood as cultural and historical regimes of truth which dictate what we often mistakenly conceive as trans-cultural and trans-historical epistemological criteria by which truth can be objectively accessed. The underlying older problem here remains freedom versus determinism: the ways in which human freedom is conjugated with the particular and the universal by each option. The option of epistemology over ontology presupposes that human freedom and critical reflexivity are safeguarded by epistemological criteria that are deemed universal yet not bound to any worldview in particular (hence allow one to free oneself from traditional or imposed truths); while the option of ontology over epistemology posits that epistemological rules are not universal, but, from a universal standpoint, historically and culturally determined, a knowledge which precisely makes us free and critically reflexive about the ways in which we frame the problem of truth.

Two contemporary accounts of ontology can be used to exemplify each one of these options: the work of Martin Heidegger and the recent developments in the field of cybernetic and programmatic languages (Barquin Laffite and al. 2000, p. 209). Rather than reducing ontology to the problem of articulating theories of reference between linguistic and the extra-linguistic entities, both these developments in ontology try to expand its meaning beyond these strict relations of correspondence between linguistic and non-linguistic entities. Both these developments, as we will soon illustrate, can be used to politicize ontology. In the field

of Artificial Intelligence and cybernetic programming, what exists at an ontological level includes all of what can be represented (Gruber 1993). An ontological commitment is defined as a concurrence to use a vocabulary (i.e., ask queries and make assertions) in a way that is consistent (but not complete) with respect to the theory specified by an ontology (Gruber 1993). For Gruber, ontologies are used to describe commitments for sets of agents so that they can communicate about a domain of discourse without necessarily operating on a globally shared theory. From an instrumentalist perspective, an agent commits to an ontology if its observable actions are consistent with the definitions in the ontology. The idea of ontological commitments is based on the Knowledge-Level perspective, which Gruber, following Newell (1982), defines as “a level of description of the knowledge of an agent that is independent of the symbol-level representation used internally by the agent” (Gruber 1993). Knowledge is attributed to agents by observing their actions; an agent “knows” something if it acts as if it had the information and is acting rationally to achieve its goals. Gruber defines ontology as the vocabulary with which queries and assertions are exchanged among agents. Ontological commitments are implicit or explicit agreements to use the shared vocabulary in a coherent and consistent manner. The agents sharing a vocabulary need not share a knowledge base; each knows things the other does not, and an agent who commits to an ontology is not required to answer all queries that can be formulated in the shared vocabulary. In other words, a commitment to a common ontology is a guarantee of consistency, but not completeness, with respect to queries and assertions using the vocabulary defined in the ontology.

On the other hand, the study of ontology *as formulated by an Existent* both shifts and deepens the scope of the traditional definition given to ontology. The notion of an Existent comes from Heidegger who sets apart human beings as “existence” from the being of “things” in the world. Heidegger suggests that our ways of being human and the ways in which the world

reveals itself emerge *historically* through the fundamental act of interrogating Being (humans are beings that understand Being). This existential act of questioning Being generates the horizon of unspoken and apparently unquestionable meanings at the root of a proto-representation dividing human beings as “subjects” (existent) and other entities as “objects” (present). Central to Heidegger’s conception of ontology is the argument that our access to the “truth of being” is deeply implicated in temporality. But here time is not viewed by Heidegger as a frame in which human existence is located in terms of successive and thus discrete events; rather the temporalization of time is precisely what informs our understanding of being. Heidegger describes this existential capture of time in terms of “Dasein”; a concept by which he characterizes a being for which its onticity becomes an issue, with the result of making this being precisely aware of its own temporality and finitude (being-toward-death).

In other words, the transcendence of Dasein, by relation to itself, is founded on the finitude of Dasein’s existence. The finitude of human existence becomes the foundation of the concept of the subject, no longer as a simple determinant of the subject, but as the very foundation of the subject’s subjectivity. It is because there is finite existence —Dasein—that consciousness itself is possible. Here Heidegger’s analysis opens up an existential and dynamic exploration of the ways in which we position ourselves toward the question of Being: an exploration that moves us beyond the strict epistemological account of ontology or the problem of coherence between speech acts and reality per se. Heidegger’s notion of Dasein casts a supra-existential dimension on ontology. Ontological inquiries for Heidegger are no longer imagined by means of notions which are intended to go beyond the realm of existence (Levinas 1996, 16). Critical of Aristotle’s theoretical and contemplative implications, Heidegger would rather reveal what is *existentially* at stake, and does so by interrogating being. The originality of Heidegger’s analysis consists in moving beyond the traditional idea of self-consciousness predicated upon

the possibility of such a distinction to begin with (subject\object). Self-knowledge for Heidegger refuses the object\subject structure and has nothing to do with theory alone; rather, the understanding of existence is the very dynamism of this existence: “understanding constitutes the mode of which existence is its possibilities,” which, *qua understanding*, creates its existence right there, implying simultaneously a propensity to go beyond the situation imposed (Levinas 1996, pp.23-24).

At this point, we can notice how far we have travelled from the question of the first principles of Nature to the problem of matching linguistic and non-linguistic entities. Contemporary works in ontology now encompass problems far beyond the initial question of Being or Nature. Developments in cybernetic and Heideggerian studies are two telling examples of this. On the one hand, the pragmatic adaptation of ontology found in cybernetics not only pluralizes the domain of ontology (now ontologies), but also articulates an analytics of ontologies as communicative strategies we can now assess in terms of efficiency and effects. The problem of ontology as formulated by cybernetics is not concerned with the problem of matching theories of reference with reality *per se*. Ontology is rather depicted as a means by which a language is configured to achieve specific predetermined goals. The articulation of ontology thus becomes a matter of *techne*, of pragmatics and control. The functionalist and pragmatic approach found in cybernetics expands the domain of ontology to the usefulness of generating meanings. It provides a grid of analysis, an *analytics of ontology*, by which it becomes possible to evaluate ontologies in terms of their effects beyond the question of whether they match what reality *really* is *per se* (i.e. the political effects of representations about reality).

On the other hand, Heidegger's work also moves us beyond the epistemological rupture which frames ontology in terms of correspondence between statements and reality, away from reducing ontology to a mere problem of knowledge. Moving beyond the problem of matching theories of reference to extra-linguistic entities (or beyond the problem of knowing reality through the apprehension of empirical objects which would essentially differ from the spirit who grasps them), ontology "as Dasein" introduces the idea of "a knowledge that comes about throughout its very existence" (Levinas 1996, p. 31). Moving beyond a knowledge preoccupied with the problem of objectifying quiddities, the question of being can now be understood as refracting modes of existing and consciousness (and not only communicative strategies), paving the way for investigations making explicit the situated, contingent and finite comprehensions of reality formulated by existing agents. Such a modulation of ontology confers the possibility of investigating the historical ramifications by which we can better understand the direction and motivation behind the formation of specific knowledge. In other words, the examination of ontology as refracting modes of existence allows the exploration of ontology as being contingent upon its condition of emergence, namely the existing agents who formulate interrogations on "what is," themselves embedded in cultural, social and political dynamics which modulate their comprehension of reality (and truth) in important respects.

In the wake of what can be called the cultural *and* technological turns, Heidegger's work and the adaptation of ontology by computer programmers can be seen as major influences in the repositioning of ontology as the study of finite and contingent languages or systems of meanings by which the distinctions between what is real and not real are understood through technological, social, cultural, historical and *political* mediums. Cultures, worldviews, ontologies and technology have become practically synonyms for a new generation of thinkers insisting on the plastic, transient and boundless nature of power and identity

relations. Emerging with other combinations such as “social ontology” and “cultural ontology,” the newly forged term “political ontology” would describe these attempts to circumscribe these features which have been conceptualized by a group as the most basic or elementary aspects of their reality in relation to their understanding of politics.<sup>77</sup> As such, ontological claims can thus be understood as constituting the foundations, limits and possibilities of transgression within which epistemological, ethical and political claims are made intelligible between agents sharing a basic commitment to a common ontology.<sup>78</sup> They constitute what Michel Foucault describes as “regimes of truth” which frame the “games,” always contingent, open and historically-situated, by which “true” and “false” statements are delineated (Foucault 2001d, pp. 1527-1589).

In a rare and appreciated effort to clarify both his usage of ontology and political ontology, Mario Blaser offers three possible ways to understand ontology which illustrate well the merging influence of the cultural and (de)constructivist turn. The first definition he offers is a dictionary definition: “any way of understanding the world must make assumptions (which may be implicit or explicit) about what kinds of things do or can exist, and what might be their conditions of existence, relations of dependency, and so on. Such an inventory of kinds of being and their relations is an ontology” (Scott and Marshall 2005; quoted in Blaser 2009, p. 877). The second borrows from the insights and language of technology studies according to which “ontologies do not precede mundane practices, rather they are shaped through the practices and interactions of both human and non-humans” (see Latour 1999; Law 2004; Mol 1999; quoted in Blaser 2009, p. 877). His third definition “builds on a voluminous

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<sup>77</sup> As Petit is suggesting: “Every political theory, every theory as to how the polity ought to be constituted and governed, presupposes an account of the relationships and structure in virtue of which individuals in a polity constitute a people, a nation, and a state: if you like, it presupposes a political ontology” (Petit 2005, p. 157).

<sup>78</sup> Even to deny the need of making any ontological claim is to implicitly endorse an ontological position which holds that reality can be known independently from politics. Such position often assumes uncritically the dominant ontology founded in one’s culture.

ethnographic record that traces the connections between “myths” and practices: ontologies also manifest as “stories” in which the assumptions of what kinds of things and relations make up a given world readily graspable. Warning us against reducing ontology to their verbalized aspect and not to the way in which those stories are embodied and enacted only gives us half the story, Blaser insists that ontologies must be understood as total enactments involving discursive and non-discursive aspects (Blaser 2009, p. 877).

Based on these definitions of ontology, Blaser delineates two inter-related meanings for the term “political ontology.” On the one hand, political ontology refers to the study of “the politics involved in the practices that shape a particular world or ontology.” On the other hand, it refers “to a field of study that focuses on the conflicts that ensue as different worlds or ontologies strive to sustain their own existence as they interact and mingle with each other” (Blaser 2009, p. 890). In both cases, the study of political ontology would allow us to deepen our critique of cultures by enhancing our capacity to recognize other ontologies in their own terms, while grasping the power dynamics and the productivity of their mutual engagements in their present conjuncture. The study of political ontology can thus be understood as the analytical study of ontologies broadly defined as “worldviews” and hence the examination of their respective truth claims, epistemology, cosmology, practices of subjectification\objectification. But perhaps more importantly, political ontology can also be understood as a *practice* introducing politics into the heart of ontology with the argument that no ontology will ever be in a position to frame completely the contingencies of politics. Political ontology would thus embody more than a theoretical shift in political theory, but the radicalization of politics against all attempts to frame the ways in which we should perceive reality, joining task with the project proposed by Oskala of politicizing ontology.

#### 4. Objections to Politicizing Ontology

The argument that our understanding of reality is politicized, plural, and contingent upon social and cultural factors leads to a critique that turns on claims about ontological relativism, epistemic confusion, and determinism (Critchley 2007; quoted in Oskala 2007). It can be argued that by mixing ontology with politics, by accepting that our knowledge of reality is always already modulated by relations of power, the possibility of accessing an objective reality—without which it is impossible to establish what is false or wrong—is denied. As politics is dissolved into ontology, relations of power and our access to reality would become coterminous. The project of articulating an objective theory of reference between linguistic expressions and extra-linguistic entities would be lost to the contingency of power dynamics which would determine our understanding of both domains. As a consequence, we would lose our ability to discern what belongs to politics and what belongs to reality (as constituted of bare facts). The capacity to provide a coherent language to speak about reality and to critically engage our political activities would thus be lost. Mixing ontology and politics would neither answer the question of what exactly we mean by politics (lost in the notion that everything is political), nor would it clarify what we mean by ontology.

#### 5. The Epistemological Defence

One possible way to answer this critique consists in adopting an instrumentalist standpoint similar to the one found in cybernetics and other analytical works on ontology in order to show that the study of political ontology does not necessarily lead to the abdication of all criteria by which we conduct and justify our actions: to show that political ontology does not necessarily lead to total relativism (hence to endorse an epistemological defence). We can argue, for instance, that embracing the view that the production of ontology is contingent, plural and politicised does not preclude us from accepting the principle according to which

making one choice excludes *de facto* all the other choices that one could have made at the same point. Quite the contrary, to recognize the politicized and pluralist dimensions of ontology would involve *de facto* the recognition that some things that are said about reality matter more than others, for otherwise there would be no basis for debates between contending ontologies (Hoy 2004, p. 235). Furthermore, to assume that we can critically engage a plurality of ontologies would also imply *de facto* that ontological statements can be assessed against some kind of criteria by which we have to assume that ontologies are not all equivalent.

James K. Feibleman suggests the criteria of logical consistency, completeness and applicability to weigh up contending ontologies (1968, p. 4). Arguably the same criteria could be used to evaluate the political functions of a given ontology. The criterion of applicability is particularly relevant here for it implies that contending ontologies must ultimately be assessed against a “reality” beyond the scope of their internal consistency and completeness. The domain of ontology is indeed useless for Feibleman if it is to remain a self-referential construction with no application in the reality it tries to render. Hence, the criterion of application would represent the ultimate test by which we could measure ontological claims against the success of their applications: an argument which, far from producing ontological relativism, assumes that we must have access to a reality of some kind in order to evaluate the failure or success of contending ontologies. The existence of many contending ontologies would confirm the existence of a common reality we have to assume in order for us to debate, evaluate and prefer some ontology rather than others. As Feibleman puts it:

There is no official ontology; contending ontologies must support their claims on the basis of consistency, completeness and applicability. Rival ontologies exist theoretically and practically, and assert both abstractly and concretely their various claims. They exist theoretically in the written and spoken words

of professional philosophers. We shall see that their practical existence is somewhat more concrete, for they exist practically as elements of cultures (Feibleman 1968, p. 4).

Framing the domain of ontology within a realist, coherentist and functionalist approach is however a problematic solution. It can be argued that the epistemological criteria posited by Feibleman are themselves the offspring of a particular ontology: a particular understanding of knowledge and reality shaped by a specific culture. In other words, it is not only the content but also the rules by which knowledge is organized and evaluated that would be contingent upon social, cultural and political determinants. Feibleman's own cultural biases appear quite clearly when he argues that an individual or an entire culture can "progress only to the extent to which change is allowable, and improvement is permitted only when the final truth is held to be unknown" (Feibleman 1951, p. 420). In other words, the criteria by which Feibleman evaluates contending ontologies refract the values cherished by a specific culture, in this case the values of Western modern culture (valuing progress, change, and the assumption of an unknown and open-ended truth).

To assume that one's reflexive capacities, choice of criteria and judgements are shaped in an important respect by cultural factors is now a widely accepted position; different cultures generate different worldviews by which their experiences are negotiated and interpreted according to various exchanges and relations. Problems emerge when the criteria and values by which a society organizes its dominant comprehension of reality serve to dismiss or exclude what is deemed contrary to its understanding of reality. Feibleman's position on the evaluation of contending ontologies is a good example of this. For Feibleman, any cultures "as applied ontologies" would inhibit free and progressive inquiry if they do not embrace the criteria mentioned above (Feibleman 1951, p. 420). The ontological functions of a culture are regarded as "bad" if they formulate final answers to ultimate questions (Feibleman 1951, p.

420). More precisely, Feibleman's analysis of ontology assumes that the knowledge of reality must be geared toward a comprehension of progress ultimately understood as *freedom* from any constraints. In other words, despite his sensitivity toward "cultures as applied ontologies," he fails to recognize that the pursuit of ontological truth ought to escape the biases not only of one's own subjectivity, but also all social or cultural biases.

Here Feibleman's understanding of freedom in relation to ontology is also problematic. His view on freedom assumes an atomistic and Darwinist configuration of autonomy which ranks the highest achievement of freedom as that which can subsist on its own. Feibleman's opening statement cannot be any clearer on this: "the smallest human isolate is a culture, not an individual. The test for valid isolation is the prospect of survival: the individual cannot live alone, a culture can" (Feibleman 1951, p. 416). Here again, Feibleman's comprehension of autonomy expresses another dominant trait that has shaped Western culture in important respect: namely, the belief that what is understood to be dependant is inferior to what is understood as being independent and self-sufficient; an ideal not necessarily shared by all worldviews, including many Aboriginal and Eastern understandings of the inter-dependent relations between humans and Nature (see Atleo 2004; Cajete 2000; Halbfass 1992). Finally, Feibleman's analysis displays a strong appetite for mastering, controlling and predicting the object of his inquiry. Feibleman's conclusion could not be clearer about his intentions: "To bring together the speculative and empirical branches of ontology, after the manner of mathematical empiricism, would be to discover for ontology a way in which it could be used for the prediction and control of actual human cultures" (Feibleman 1951, p. 422).

Feibleman's arguments are neither openly malicious nor remotely foreign from most peoples' comprehension of the purposefulness of ontology. They are in fact good examples of the

subtle process that can lead our minds to associate ontological reasoning with notions such as progress, objectivism, efficiency and freedom that have instantiated Western worldviews. Following Feibleman's logic, we are led to assume that two contradictory claims about the nature of reality cannot both be true at the same time. We usually assume this because we have already accepted the premise that there can be only one reality beneath our various and sometimes contradictory interpretations of it. This assumption leads to the widespread belief that there can be only one true ontology that can effectively match what reality is.<sup>79</sup> When this belief is accepted as a fact, then we assume that contending ontologies have to compete for the correct way to account for "reality" according to criteria such as logical coherence, completeness and concrete application. But often less noticed is the way in which from the simple assumption that there cannot be two contradictory "true" judgements about reality under the same respect, all worldviews are assimilated within an adversarial paradigm in which their respective truth claims are gradually dismantled, objectified and measured against technical criteria reducing worldviews to be simple "means to an end." Although they may appear self-evident to many of us, the criteria chosen to do so are not neutral; they expose an understanding of what counts as things and legitimate goals. In this particular case, these criteria reveal the presence of an *ethos* of technicity in which even worldviews ought to be assessed along pragmatic criteria subsuming the ontologies by which entire cultures experience "truth" to the status of mere tools that can be objectified, measured, evaluated, and eventually control.

## 6. The Ontological Defence

It is here that the work of Heidegger can be particularly helpful in revealing how pragmatic and analytical views of ontology refract the influence of a specific worldview or world-

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<sup>79</sup> It is important to notice that the concepts of ontology, reality and culture have all been framed by an atomistic epistemology which imagines these concepts as discrete entities. It is my intention to problematize such an epistemology in chapter 5.

disclosure, a specific *ethos* we could here describe in terms of *technicity*. Rather than formulating a science of ontologies, the work of Heidegger can help us turn the question around by asking: why are we in presence of a *Dasein* that attempts to reduce all possible variations of the questions of being through science, manipulation and technology? If we ask this question, while considering what Heidegger describes as an Age of technicity characterised by scientism, abstraction and specialisation, we can perhaps better understand the various attempts to seize ontology analytically (Feibleman) or to reduce it to a technology geared toward pragmatic goals (Gruber) that appear more as the contaminants of our own way of understanding the question of being rather than neutral means of weighing contending ontologies.

According to Heidegger, we live in an Age of technicity characterised by a belief in rationality and technological progress as solutions to most of our predicaments. To control being or Nature technologically means that everything found in Nature (including humans) is gradually objectified and eventually apprehended as resources. According to Heidegger, the development of modern physics since at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century is a product of this way of relating to the world, justifying it, and helping to produce the machinery that objectifies the world as resource in an ever-growing and deepening way. By limiting what counts as truth only to scientific knowledge and its technological applications, this mode of world-disclosure is denounced by Heidegger not only as excluding other modes of experiencing truth, but as forgetting the very essence of being which consists in a perpetual “withdrawn hiddenness” (Rayner 2001, p. 147). Heidegger is not suggesting that scientific knowledge is purely wrong or evil. He rather suggests that the Western history of metaphysics reached its completion when metaphysical thought was entirely instantiated in object-oriented and technical relations: when metaphysics itself was conquered by the objectifying forces of technology (Rayner

2001). For Heidegger, by the time it unfolds into modernity, “metaphysics has become a way of thinking addressed solely to objects present to a subject, with no thought given to the fundamental-ontological conditions of the subject-object relationship itself,” leading to the fundamental oblivion of the transcendental exteriority of what Heidegger calls the “clearing” (Rayner 2001, pp. 146-7). This technological enframing which leads to the oblivion of the clearing is tantamount to nihilism for Heidegger.

The goal of resisting technological enframing could therefore be to recapture the awareness of this quasi-transcendental exteriority. As Rayner explains it, as we give ourselves over to this truth, our existential relationship to technological enframing is decisively transformed (Rayner 2001). More precisely, the compulsion to reveal the real as objectified resource is weakened as we open ourselves to the mystery of clearing, leading to the open-possibility of a new mode of interacting with being. The work of Heidegger can help us to understand the limitations of Feibleman’s work as an example of the failure to register the ways in which one’s examination of ontology bears normative implications which can silence *de facto* other ways of conceiving one’s relations to being.

Feibleman’s account of ontology as an “analytics of culture” reveals not only the implicit political dimensions of ontology, but also the political dimensions of a culture in which the knowledge of reality is yielded to an appetite of control and standardization, for better and worse. Both as the products of professional philosophers and as elements of culture, ontologies confer an explanatory power capable of influencing how people perceive and act upon reality (or Nature). As such, ontological claims possess tremendous political leverage. Ontological statements are in fact inherently political in their attempts to delimit what and how “reality” is thinkable. To posit a claim about the nature of reality (or Nature) constitutes

an attempt to delineate how to perceive the realm of political possibilities (both discursively and non-discursively). To be clear, ontological claims incarnate attempts to convince others about the nature of reality, attempts which also imply that such a Nature can also be perceived differently (otherwise there would be no need to convince anyone). Hence the individual(s), castes or expert groups who possess the ability to speak the “truth” of what constitutes “reality” not only possess an immense political leverage in the societies where they incarnate figures of authority, but they also supplement a “language of truth” by which we can both contest or justify the use of our political activities. Knowing this, the project of recasting the “withdrawn-hiddenness of being” away from its technological enframing may need to start by freeing the disruptive forces of the Political from this mode of enframing (i.e. the technologization of politics), or perhaps from any modes of enframing. Political ontology would thus become more than a simple theoretical exercise cross-examining ontology and politics; by introducing the disruptive forces of politics at the heart of ontology, the contestable and ever-shifting forces of politics could incarnate the ultimate rebuttal against any modes of total enclosure, by politicizing “*that* on the basis of which beings are already understood” (Dreyfus 1996).<sup>80</sup>

## 7. Politicizing Ontology/Resisting Ontology

To explore political ontology from this perspective opens up the possibility of examining the presence of political strategies embedded deep in the production of values, norms, representations, and knowledge that shapes what we call “culture.” It leads us to better understand that not only individuals and collectives can attempt to dominate one another, but that the production of worldviews itself can serve as a powerful and pervasive means to subjugate, assimilate or destroy other cultures. To destroy or subjugate the system of

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<sup>80</sup> The emphasis is mine.

knowledge by which individuals and groups experience themselves is now recognized as cultural violence or genocide.<sup>81</sup> But less acknowledged is the subtle form of violence a culture can generate from something as seemingly inoffensive as the pursuit of ontological truth. In the history of Western political philosophy, this strategy mostly took the form of ontological statements assuming that we must know objectively what reality (or Nature) is in order to act politically in the right manner. To put it otherwise, the overwhelming tendency in Western culture has been to deny the contingency of its own ontological statements (viewed as the correct knowledge or methods), to deny that truth can be shaped by the contingency of one's culture and by various power dynamics.

To conceive “politics as yielding to Nature” is one way to summarize such a strategy (Rowe 2003, p. 643).<sup>82</sup> Taking the examples of Aristotle and Hobbes, James K. Rowe argues that this tendency can be observed in both their philosophies in which politics is explained with reference to a “subpolitical Nature.” For Rowe, Aristotle defines politics as the *natural telos* of rational beings who ought to organize themselves in this natural entity, the *polis*; Hobbes, in contrast, explains politics as resulting from an *artificial decision* to establish a despotic and absolute sovereign power in order to compensate for a Nature that created all rational beings equal—a state of Nature which plunges all into a state of perpetual war if a single power doesn't rule (Rowe 2003). In both cases, we can see that the objectification of Nature plays a determinant role for the definition of politics: a tendency which most—if not all—Western

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<sup>81</sup> Cultural genocide cause people to lose their sense of ethno identity, language, systems of belief, spiritual beliefs, cultural narratives, memoirs and so on. The term has been used in a variety of cases, including the invasion of Tibet by China (Gilbert 1959; Sautman 2006), the massacre of Armenians (Hovannisian 2007), and by many First Nations across the world following colonial annexing by Western powers, especially in the United States of America, Canada and Australia (Dirk 2004), with particular reference to generations of children forced into residential schools (Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council 1996; Churchill 2004).

<sup>82</sup> Rowe defines Nature as “the inherent force which directs either the world or human beings or both. Nature [...] is a determinative nonhuman (or suprahuman) force contrasting with the laws and constitutions of human design.” In other word, a free will capable of escaping the deterministic effects of Nature would be precisely what set us apart from “Nature.” I will problematize further this dualistic conception of Nature and their implications in the next chapter.

political philosophies embrace in one way or another (Rowe 2003, pp. 643-649).<sup>83</sup>

Ontological claims can indeed be found at the heart of most, if not all, political philosophies where they can be understood as “technologies of power” deployed to convince audiences of the correct understanding of reality (Nature), therefore trustworthy for the conduct of political affairs. By exploring the ontological claims found in Aristotle and Hobbes’ philosophy, Rowe is warning us against what he sees as the dangerous influence of subpolitical definitions of Nature or reality that would frame political freedom. To resist the seducing power of subpolitical definitions would consist in freeing the political from Nature and the grip of ontological claims.

A similar warning against the danger of depoliticization has been formulated by Carl Schmitt. For Schmitt, the danger of depoliticization would rest with the influence of “neutralization stages” or “concepts of truth” whose purpose is to mediate religious and political struggles when deemed irreconcilable with the project of achieving either universal peace or the negotiation of a *status quo* (Schmitt 2007, p.89). What Schmitt means here by “concept of truth” exceeds the classical definitions of truth (either in its logical, synthetic or analytic conception). Schmitt’s “concept of truth” can be understood as referring to the beliefs, experiences, and values that modulate the way in which an individual or group conceives reality and responds to that conception (Nadeau 1999, p. 463).<sup>84</sup> A “dominant concept truth” refers to the values, or system of thought, in a society that are most standard and widely held at a given time, namely the dominant worldview. They are shaped both by the community’s cultural background and by the context of the historical moment. Shifts from one dominant

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<sup>83</sup> The same could be said about Plato, Suarez, Spinoza, and Kant, to name just a few (Coujou 2006).

<sup>84</sup> I modified Nadeau’s definition of Kuhn’s notion of paradigm by including more than just the members of a scientific community in order to better approximate Schmitt’s usage of the term “concept of truth” (Nadeau 1999, p. 463). From a cultural standpoint, models of explanation about reality often override the so-called disciplinary boundaries one finds within a given society. To restrict the notion of “paradigm shifts” only to the framing of a closed community is a strange assumption. More precisely, to presume that the poly-semantic nature of non-scientific concepts makes the existence of “paradigm shifts” beyond the scientific community impossible is to underestimate the existence and reversal of social concepts delineated by Bourdieu as “habitus.”

concept of truth to the next are explained along a similar logic to Kuhn's theory of paradigm shifts.<sup>85</sup> In short, these shifts denote a change in how a given culture goes about organizing and understanding reality. When a "dominant concept of truth" becomes too controversial to assure societal cohesion, Schmitt argues, it is then replaced by one that can assure that function. But for Schmitt, it is not the random introduction of anomalies that the dominant paradigm is incapable to account for that creates a state of crisis (Kuhn), but rather the fact that no concepts of truth (in the wide interpretation that Schmitt gives to that concept) will ever be capable to pacify the ultimate *ratio* of the Political. As Schmitt puts it:

[...] the essential point for me is that theology, the former central domain, was abandoned because it was controversial, in favour of another—neutral—domain, one hoped to find minimum agreement and common premises allowing for the possibility of security, clarity, prudence, and peace. Europeans thus moved in the direction of neutralization and minimalization, whereby they accepted the law which "kept them in line" for the following centuries and constituted their concept of truth (Schmitt 2007, pp.89-90).<sup>86</sup>

Schmitt is here referring to the historical succession of "central domains" he identifies with the theological, metaphysical, scientific, humanist, economical and technical Ages, and their respective "neutralizing" concepts of truth. The solution for Schmitt consists not in pacifying tensions according to the acceptance of ever-greater truths capable of harnessing our will to struggle, but rather to channel such a will through the ultimate *ratio* of the Political based on the friend/enemy distinction, through the rise of a strong political leader and a total commitment to politics. For Schmitt, the *ratio* of the Political exceeds all other

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<sup>85</sup> As Tracy B. Strong suggests, the Schmittian notion of "central domains" plays here the same role for Schmitt as paradigms do for Thomas Kuhn (Schmitt 2007, p. xxvii).

<sup>86</sup> Schmitt does not describe the itineraries of a cultural form of dominance here, nor is he interested in describing what successive "laws" in the sense of Vico's or Comte's laws of three stages (theology, metaphysics, science). To be clear, Schmitt does not subscribe to a theory of ascent or decline, but rather adheres to the notion of dominant stages. For him, despite momentary domination of a stage, there is always a plurality of stages coexisting (Schmitt 2007, pp. 82-83).

rationalizations of politics, mostly because Schmitt formulates less a rational argument than an existential one.

Rowe's critique of the subpolitical, largely inspired by the work of Timothy W. Luke on green governmentality (thus by Michel Foucault), certainly differs from Schmitt's totalitarian critique of the neutralization of the Political.<sup>87</sup> Yet their critiques overlap in their denunciation of any aprioristic principles that would harness the agonistic forces of politics. Schmitt, Rowe, Luke and Foucault all share deep suspicion toward any kind of "truth" that could domesticate politics, including for Rowe and Luke any ecological truth. The problem described by Rowe extends therefore far beyond the particularities of Aristotle's or Hobbes' philosophy. As Foucault's studies on governmentality illustrate, most Western political rationalities have emerged in conjunction with some ontological statements aligning their political views with some kind of naturalistic justification. These justifications can be found along the lines of teleological principles (the Greek *polis* and city-citizen games), God as creator of both Nature and politics (Pastoral power), the discovery of natural or inherent qualities of politics (reason of state), a pre-political state of Nature explaining the artificiality of politics (contractualists), and a specific domain that ought to be protected against excessive political interventions (liberal governmentality). In other words, all political philosophies contain claims about the nature of reality, which, following Rowe's argument, frame our understanding of politics. According to Schmitt, many of these ontological statements constitute the core of various "concepts of truth" deployed to tame the conflictual nature of politics.<sup>88</sup> These "concepts of truth" succeed one another by providing greater zones of neutrality than their predecessors,

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<sup>87</sup> Rowe's project is an attempt to free politics from any subpolitical truths or any pre-categorizations which would oblige us to think politics in this or that way. As such, Rowe could still argue that Schmitt is framing our understanding of politics through his friend/enemy distinction and his totalizing view of the Political. The problem is that such framing doesn't appeal to any subpolitical reality to explain or justify the existence of politics. Schmitt's distinction between friend/enemy is indeed *infra* political; it escapes the accusation of an aprioristic formulation of politics by constantly re-contextualizing where this distinction lies.

<sup>88</sup> Ontological claims can indeed be found at the heart of the theological, metaphysical, scientific, humanist, economical and positivistic "central domains" described by Schmitt.

which, for, Schmitt, translates as de-politicizing or neutralizing the conflicts he sees vital to politics. Ontological claims can thus be understood as “neutralization technologies” enabling political strategies to (re)position themselves as being “in line” with the authority of some neutral and objective truth, only to be disputed again.<sup>89</sup>

#### 8. Governmentalization as Neutralization of Politics

Michel Foucault’s account of governmentality can be read in parallel with the historical account of the “spheres of neutralization” described by Carl Schmitt. Although their interpretations of politics, resistance and freedom differ considerably, Foucault’s critique of modes of domination exhibits some striking similarities to Schmitt’s critique of de-politicization. More precisely, Foucault articulates a strong critique of any processes which attempt to “dominate” our capacities to be and think otherwise than as prescribed. He does this by describing how various political rationalities (which involve different ontological assumptions) are enmeshed with what he calls “regimes of truth.” Just like the itinerary of different political rationalities Foucault explored in his governmentality studies, these regimes of truth are never fully capable of framing dissents, struggles, and the reversals of perspective. The emergence of new political rationalities and/or ontologies are not explained in terms of progress and the achievement of rationality, but rather in terms of “counter-conducts” and episodic struggles which account for the possibility of freedom. In other words, freedom is depicted by Foucault as our inherent and sometimes spontaneous capacities to resist whatever attempts to harness it, including ontology. For Foucault, it is this dialectical relation between the various attempts of governmentalization orchestrated in accordance with different “regimes of truth”, and the emergence of “counter-conducts” and struggles that accounts for what is political freedom.

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<sup>89</sup> As Schmitt suggests: “Europeans always have wandered from a conflictual to a neutral domain, and always the newly won neutral domain has become immediately another area of struggle” (Schmitt 2007, p. 90).

The presence of this dialectic of freedom\domination is widely illustrated in his governmentality studies. In the “city-citizen games” described by Foucault, for instance, we can find the description of a comprehensive and teleological view of Nature framing politics as the *telos* for “political animals” endowed with rationality, justifying the “natural” exclusion of those not endowed with such rationality (children, women, slaves and barbarian). This teleological understanding of politics, itself re-configured through the imperial conquests of Alexander the Great and the Roman Empire, could not escape the fragmentation of a society based on wide civic disparities pressured by the task of incorporating different peoples in the dream of a single and unified Empire. This fragmentation led to the popularity of more inclusive “pastorate-shepherd games” in which the idea of Nature is now a creation of God. In “pastorate-shepherd games,” the principle of political exclusion\inclusion is no longer based on a teleological understanding of Nature, but rather on one’s allegiance to the only true God there is and its representatives on Earth. But again, the fragmentation of Christendom through theological disputes, tensions between secular and religious rulers, and the multiplication of counter-conducts and religious wars gradually led to the emergence of this conception of a more distant God depicted as the Creator of “natural laws” which could be accessed by the lights of “natural reason.” This re-appropriation of a Nature through the concept of “natural laws” and the rise of naturalised metaphysics led to the emancipation of politics from its onto-theological tutelage via this idea that politics is also endowed with its own natural and organizing principles. Politics was then gradually divorced from its naturalness to become this artificial enterprise mediated via various contractual engagements allegedly ratified between “naturally” equal members of a civil society to enforce the structure of a sovereign and legitimate government (Locke, Hobbes, Rousseau). From there, the notion of “civil society” was progressively released from the bondage of any “naturalness” in favour of a conception of

society based on the separation of private and public spheres and an immanent order based on the “natural laws” of commerce (cycles of recession and expansion), free enterprise and the free circulation of capital.

The goal here is not to describe with all due precision the details provided by Foucault’s historical reading of the governmental regimes stretching from the Greek to contemporary liberalism, but to illustrate the ontological fluctuations and reversals at play behind the succession of political regimes. Foucault’s studies in governmentality expose how the attribution of “naturalness” have conferred to its object a sense of complexity, self-organizing and spontaneity which have first emancipated politics from the grip of theology (*raison d’état*), to finally reverse its course when “naturalness” was attributed to realities beyond the grip of human rationality and politics, namely the unpredictable outcomes of market relations and human freedom (economic pastorate and liberalism). The idea of Nature or “naturalness” played a huge role in the reversals of governmental regimes described by Foucault. Ideas of Nature are thus attributed, resisted, reversed and reshaped. As such, they were (and still are) embedded in relations of power that influence human conducts in specific ways. Although ontology appears as inexorably linked to politics, what Nature is *per se* is not important for Foucault; Nature is important because it emerges as part of rationalizations for political practices and justifications for the instauration of social control.

Hence, just like Schmitt before him, Foucault conceives politics in terms of struggles and reversals. He also shares Schmitt’s quest for a pre-legalistic explanation of how order is instituted, namely out of the forces of chaos. For Foucault, the ordering of human societies comes via numerous and disseminated relations of power which operate both below and above what is commonly refer to as politics (or Nature for that matter). The possibility of

political transformations results from immanent practices of resistance through the appropriation, internalization and the reversal of political configurations described by Foucault as never fully capable of framing their subjects. As such, Foucault's definition of freedom always exceeds the political, cultural or ontological universalistic and aprioristic attempts to define exhaustively the range of our possibilities to know, to be, or to act otherwise. Foucault insists on our capacity to disrupt the patterns which governmentalize us.

Schmitt shares Foucault's hatred for universalistic and aprioristic configurations of politics, but for another set of reasons altogether. For Schmitt, universalistic and aprioristic discourses are attempts to neutralize our pre-cultural capacity to distinguish between friends and enemies (Schmitt 2007, p. 26). For Schmitt, the task to evaluate who friends and enemies are exceeds all attempts to freeze such capacity. Such a task must be constantly actualised from an *infra-political* standpoint (hence it cannot be pre-conceptualised or pacified forever). For Schmitt, political freedom is the result of conflicts in which biological life is threatened by enemies. When confronted by such danger, Schmitt believes that individuals access the spiritual and totalizing political dimensions of their existence, which, by the same token, abolishes the false distinction between the public and the private spheres crucial in political liberalism. For Schmitt, freedom is mediated by the presence of the enemy which opens to the experience of radical otherness against which the value of one's life is evaluated in absolute terms (not in cultural terms).

Schmitt's friend\enemy distinction is probably too transcendental for Foucault. We can suspect that Foucault would abhor any pre-conceptions on how we ought to think the Political for it to be genuine. For Foucault, nothing is more dangerous than foundational or normative ideas telling us how we ought to think social order. Although Foucault would certainly agree

with Schmitt on the impossibility of framing struggles and dissensions by any definitive “regimes of truth,” there is simply no way to conceptualize in advance the Political in content or in form for Foucault. There cannot be for Foucault any pre-conceptual entries for genuine politics to happen; offering any type of guarantee in this regard would risk the next domination. But again, without that risk, one may ask, how can political freedom be experienced?

## 9. Discussion and Conclusion

It is therefore not a surprise that Foucaultian scholars who investigate the emergence of ecological rationalities which appeal to the protection of “Nature” are so quick to dismiss what they see as the reintroduction of onto-theological arguments into politics. By exploring the question of ontology in Western political thought, we have discussed the build-up of an ontological conjecture emerging from various attacks directed against the possibility of metaphysics and the gradual emptying of the concept of ontology, culminating in a technical and cultural enframing of such a notion. The rejection of Nature as an agent, a teleological process, an essence or a metaphysical entity by Foucaultian scholars is, in this context, nothing new under the sun. It is rather a new variation of a current of thinking that can be traced back, far back, to the emergence of the medieval nominalist movement (refusing the existence of universal entities), sceptics such as Montaigne sowing hostility toward any metaphysical truth, the supremacy of epistemology over ontology gradually instantiated by the Scientific Revolution, relayed by the disintegration of the teleological argument by Darwinism and the rise of historicity as a dominant paradigm of knowledge, which, by conjugating the positivity of an “historical fact” (or narrative) with a focus on the particular and the contingent, forbids the possibility of any transcendental knowledge beyond the realm of a given factuality and a given historicity. Along such a resolute anti-metaphysical itinerary,

Nature has been gradually stripped of agency, purposefulness and teleology. Seized by the combination of logical principles such as non-contradiction, identity and the excluded middle, and the quest for a first substratum or first principles, Nature has subsequently been subsumed under the monotheistic myth of Creation, then mechanized, mathematized, historicized and finally culturalized as “worldviews.”

Too metaphysical in its formulation for the modern mind, the question of ontology soon became the problem of delimiting the basis of the meaningful in linguistic exchanges (in the context of pragmatic and strategic usage); or as designating *that* by which the problem of posing what exists/not exists informs culturally modulated regimes of truth. In the first case, the question of ontology has been subsumed under *an ontology of praxis* in which “practices” becomes the basic elements of what constitutes reality. In the second case, the question of ontology has been subsumed under what we can call an *historical ontology*; namely the transcendental consecration of a temporal framework against which it becomes possible to distinguish the different cultural modulations of ontology. As such, *praxis* and *historicity* name the ontological commitments by which other ontologies are either objectified and reduced to an epistemological “means to an end” (a position which assumes the underlying freedom of the user), or to cultural narratives bounded by their own contingency and finitude to eventually become other than what they are (allowing freedom to surpass cultural determinism by virtue of its intrinsic historicity), re-enacting the Western obsession with the possibility of freedom, through the paradoxically contrived conditions of possibility which allow freedom to emerge.

The critical *ethos* by which green governmentality scholars invite us to resist any forms of naturalism, even those made in the name of protecting Nature, is, I suggest, a cluster of those

two ontological commitments. Historicity is here understood as the enfolding of various practices of resistance into whatever was previously held to be true; as *that* which allows us, as Foucault puts it, to release the tight correspondence between words and things (Foucault 1966). By historicizing *and* politicizing the ontology by which we hold our existences to be true—by injecting open-ended practices of resistance into the heart of the principle by which we reflect about our experience through a quasi-transcendental sense of continuum—the *ontology of praxis* and *historical ontology* have been aligned. As such, determination of Reality can no longer precede the anarchic and open-ended practices of resistance; the pursuit of truth can no longer dictate or assure the path we should embrace.

The question we now have to consider to is whether the alignment of these two ontological commitments is not itself the product of a specific culture which not only forecloses the possibility of relating to what is radically other (in this case “Nature”), but furthermore assimilates and gradually dissolves other worldviews by dictating the negative ontological terms which necessarily make them historical and finite narratives, fundamentally made of open-ended practices irreducible to any transcendental or universal truths. And the even more troubling question is this: how can we, while articulating such an interrogation, not relapse into an objectification of the ontology we are precisely trying to engage critically?

**PART 2:**  
**NATURE AND THE ONTOLOGICAL QUESTION: A CRITIQUE OF HISTORICAL  
ONTOLOGY**

## Chapter 5

### Historical Ontology, Will and the Question of Nature

One sees that science also rests on a faith: there is no science at all "without premises".  
Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, 344

“...then perhaps one will have to conclude, in ironic and anticipatory reference to Nietzsche, that the early Foucault, by reactivating the Kantian theme...has defeated himself from the very beginning”  
Béatrice Han, *Foucault's Critical Project*

#### 1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, we explored the concept of green governmentality. We examined two ontological commitments we believe most green governmentality scholars embrace in their attempt to “politicize ontology” (nominalism and historicism). We then explored the notion of ontology by emphasizing the deployment of a resolute anti-metaphysical itinerary in the modern history of Western thought, culminating in the consecration of what we have called a “scientific culture” at the center of which we find a disenchanted paradigm. Along this itinerary, we witnessed the gradual recession and dismissal of overarching normative commitments derived from the nature of reality, and the dislocation of ethico-ontological considerations (through the adoption of the fact\value distinction). We suggested that the end of onto-theological supremacy was not only caused by the failure to produce a natural theology that could synthesize Aristotelianism and monotheistic theology (gradually replaced by the rise of a mathematized physics geared toward motion, efficiency and experiment), but also by the adoption of an historical paradigm geared toward producing a causal, positive and

materialistic explanation of processes and things.<sup>90</sup> This allowed us to identify two main epistemological entries by which Reality or Nature is assessed by modern culture: *science* as a universal methodology and *historicity* as the ontological backdrop needed for an empirical, open-ended, progressive and cumulative science to be conceivable. It also allowed us to identify the contours of a debate between the domain of epistemology and ontology (viewed as “applied culture”) over the problem of human freedom versus determinacy.

We then explored two contemporary accounts of ontology moving beyond the problem of correspondence, namely a *pragmatic* and an *existentialist* account of ontology. These two accounts reposition ontology respectively as (1) “a means to an end” whose function is to coordinate actions and results toward a given finality, and (2) as an ontological “Clearing” whose objectification (hence differentiation) emerges against the backdrop of an historicity framing the different “worldviews” by which individuals\communities engage and exchange over the determination of what counts as Real. We suggested that the concept of “politicizing ontology” in a Foucaultian vein both adopts a *pragmatic* usage of ontology—here as a political means toward a political end (a solution which presupposes already a degree of freedom in order to manipulate ontologies)—and an *existentialist* account, in which how we conceive Reality is radically questioned in terms of its political implications (a solution which presupposes our capacity to distance ourselves enough from the ontological determinants that frame our way of questioning Being). These two accounts of ontology, we argued, recast a familiar tension between the problem of determinacy versus freedom already present in both scientism and historicism as dominant paradigms of the modern *episteme*. We then suggested

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<sup>90</sup> A dominant paradigm or *episteme* Foucault himself identifies in Chapter 7 of *The Order of Things* (1966\1994): “Just as Order in Classical thought was not the visible harmony of things, or their observed arrangement, regularity or symmetry, but the particular space of their being, that which, prior to all effective knowledge, established them in the field of knowledge [savoir], so History, from the XIXth century, defines the birthplace of the empirical, that from which, prior to all established chronology, it derives its own being”(Foucault 1994, p. 219; quoted in Han 2002, p. 60).

that both ontological approaches can be seen as merging together in Foucault's critical *ethos* endorsed by most green governmentality scholars (in the form of an historical ontology and strategic practices of freedom).

This chapter engages more directly the Foucaultian critical *ethos* assumed by Green governmentality scholars in their critique of the conception of Nature. Problematizing the question of Nature, I wish to challenge what I consider the adverse effects of Foucault's treatment of ontology, especially his historical ontology which assumes that our modes of experience are necessarily bound to their own finitude and historical contingency. I wish to argue that historical ontology confines us to anthropocentric and Eurocentric formulations of Nature (1) by conceiving it as this passive, inert and constructed reality resulting from human conceptualization, and (2) by framing all cosmologies through a notion of historicity developed within the dominant tradition of Western culture.

More specifically, I wish to argue that if our goal is to find a way in which we can articulate intercultural ways to achieve ecological sustainability while minimizing the hegemony of any specific culture (or worldview) over all others, then Foucault's historical ontology remains a problematic model for achieving such an objective. If freedom or resistance has been captured by an overarching rationality of government to deepen modern style regulations and governmentality, as I have argued in the last chapter, then achieving intercultural, sustainable and non-anthropocentric politics surely does not demand more freedom or resistance in the way we are predominantly conceiving it. It rather demands a deeper shift of paradigm, a willingness to find novel ways to understand ourselves in relation to Nature in order to harmonize ourselves in an open and dynamic fashion with the Life forces which are actively

responding to our actions and inactions. Hence the question: would there be any way to imagine Nature beyond the framing of historical ontology?

## 2. The Itinerary of Historical Ontology: Possibility, Power, Transformation

In the previous chapter, I suggested that the concept of green governmentality can be read as a deepening of biopolitics that goes beyond the usual anthropocentric framework within which Foucaultian studies usually operate (Malette 2009). I argued that the problem of government from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onward was not only committed to the task of knowing\controlling\predicting\enhancing human *individual* and *population* through various technologies of security and political rationalities geared toward health and economic considerations, but also the *environment*; a notion exploding out of its nationalistic enclave during the period of imperial and colonial expansionism of the West (see Grove 1995; 1998; Crosby 1986). Here I would like to critically engage Foucault's treatment of ontology, which is often endorsed by green governmentality scholars. I wish to explore what I see as a negative or limitative conclusion often reached by green governmentality scholars, stating explicitly or implicitly that Nature is a mere conceptual construct which shifts according to the culture which formulates it, and is necessarily bounded to its own contingency as a human representation. As Timothy Luke clearly puts it:

In and of itself, Nature is meaningless unless or until particular human beings assign significance to it by interpreting some of its many ambivalent signs as meaningful to them. The outcomes of this activity, however, are inescapably indeterminate, or at least, they are culturally contingent function of who decodes which signs when and how they find decisive meaning there. Because human beings will observe natural patterns differently, choose to accentuate some, while deciding to ignore others, Nature's meaning always will be multiple and unfixed.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> In Timothy W. Luke, *Generating Green Governmentality: A Cultural Critique of Environmental Studies as Power\Knowledge Formation*. P.1. Accessible on line: [www.cddc.vt.edu/tim/tims/Tim514a.PDF](http://www.cddc.vt.edu/tim/tims/Tim514a.PDF)

By adopting implicitly or explicitly Foucault's critical *ethos*, I suggest that Green governmentality scholars can only reach a similar conclusion to Luke's when it comes to Nature. As I hope to illustrate, historical ontology is at the heart of Foucault's critical *ethos*. By adopting the framework of historical ontology, Foucaultian scholars make epistemological and ontological commitments that have serious impacts on their understanding of concepts such as Nature, culture, freedom and temporality. More precisely, historical ontology is central to Foucault's critical project in that it both relays and deepens Foucault's archaeological method, in which the notion of *episteme* is used to describe the discursive regularities that unite, *at a given period*, the discursive practices that "give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalised systems" (Foucault 1966, p. 191). Foucault's archaeological method operates by disconnecting, so to speak, discursive practices from their authorship and even from their self-ascribed goals in order to reveal the rules informing the operating paradigm which eludes even the consciousness of the knower trapped inside the former—*episteme* (Foucault 1969, pp. 12-13; 1971, pp. 30-33).

Foucault's genealogical method, which introduces the notion *dispositif*, later comes to rectify the overtly descriptive character of Foucault's discursive analysis with the inputs of non-discursive practices. It is through this addition of non-discursive practices, as Owen reminds us, "that Foucault raises, initially, the question of power and latterly, the question of ethics as these relate to the politics of truth" (Owen 1994, p.149). By broadening his investigation to non-discursive practices, Foucault attempts to overcome the limitations of his previous archaeological method, which is pressed by the problem of how paradigms of knowledge (*episteme*) can change independently from individual knowledge or any preordained Grand historical *telos*, yet without collapsing into what would be a pure form of epistemic determinism. Foucault's solution consists in shifting his focus from an archaeological

examination of the discursive regularities and rules informing the *conditions of possibility* of knowledge (*savoir*)—which exceed the internal operative rules of the systems of knowledge it makes possible (*connaissances*)—to the *effects of power* and *struggles* induced through the formation of “truth regimes.”<sup>92</sup>

### 3. A Conversation with Kant

It is clear from *the Order of Discourse*—which marks the transition in Foucault’s writings from an archaeological to a genealogical method—that Foucault wishes to avoid what he considers the pitfalls of Hegelianism and Husserlian phenomenology, both grounding transcendently the possibility of consciousness and Critique (Foucault 1971, p. 49-50, 76-77).<sup>93</sup> In this important text, Foucault reasserts his opposition to any metaphysical project he understands as the pursuit of some lost origin, a-temporal essence, a unitary perfection, transcendental definitions of the subject, or any truth that would result from a univocal definition or correspondence between words and things (Owen 1994, p. 147).<sup>94</sup> By exposing how the fluctuations in the epistemic rules by which our knowledge are constructed—epistemic rules that both precede our consciousness and the objects we pretend to know—Foucault’s anti-essentialism rejects the idea of an original Nature waiting to be discovered, or any universal and/or supra-historical truth we could access from an aprioristic standpoint. Only this time, the notion of power is introduced as being intertwined with the fabrication of

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<sup>92</sup> In *The Order of Discourse*, Foucault declares: “The genealogical portion, on the one hand, applies to the series where discourse is *effectively* formed: it tries to grasp its power of affirmation. By which I mean not so much a power which would be opposed to that of denying, but rather the power to constitute domains of objects, in respect of which one can affirm or deny true or false propositions” (Foucault 1971, p. 73. Quoted in Han, 2002, p. 103. Italic is mine).

<sup>93</sup> Foucault declares: “Husserl and Heidegger bring up for discussion again all our knowledge and its foundations, but they do this by beginning from that which is original. This analysis takes place, however, at the expense of any articulated *historical content*. Instead, what I liked in Nietzsche is the attempt to bring up for discussion again the fundamental concept of knowledge, of morals, and of metaphysics *by appealing to a historical analysis of the positivistic type, without going back to origin*” (Foucault 1989, p. 77. Quoted in Han 2002, p. 102. My italics). In Foucault, Michel. 1989. *Foucault Live: Interviews, 1966-84*, translation by John Johnston, edited by Sylvère Lotringer New York: Semiotext[e].

<sup>94</sup> See also Foucault (2001h), Nietzsche, la Généalogie, l’Histoire. Dans *Dits et Écrits*, volume 1: 1955-1976. Quarto Gallimard, imprimé en France.

discursive regimes by which we construct the various truths by which we regiment ourselves and others; power dynamics are not just corollaries of knowledge formations, they are consubstantial to their emergence. Despite this shift in focus, one conclusion remains however the same. For Foucault's nominalism, there are no meanings or things waiting to be unveiled behind our words. And even if there were, following Kant's rebuttal of the direct knowledge of the *noumenon*, we would be incapable of accessing them from an objective standpoint.

Foucault's relation to Kant deserves to be briefly unpacked here. From his *Commentary on Kant's Anthropology* to his later work such as "What is Enlightenment?," Foucault's relation to Kant has been both fruitful and controversial. Like Kant, Foucault interrogates the conditions of possibility of the constitution of knowledge. And just like Kant, Foucault rejects the idea that "the question of the condition of possibility of knowledge could find a purely empirical answer" (Han 2002, p. 42). Moreover, Foucault celebrates Kant for inaugurating an interrogation about one's present time, or for problematizing "his own discursive contemporaneity [actualité]," the same way he celebrates Baudelaire as this personification of a modern *ethos* described as this will "to 'heroize' the present" according to which the individual is no longer driven to liberate himself in his own being, but compelled to face the task of producing him or herself" (Foucault 2010, pp. 39-42; 2001j; Owen 1994; Han 2002, 74).<sup>95</sup> But what Foucault has inherited from Kant's first critique is not so much the search for an absolute foundation to knowledge, but rather the idea that "the conditions of possibility of knowledge are not homogenous with the objects they determine (Han 2002, p. 43). The main difference between Kant and Foucault lies precisely in this disjuncture, namely in Foucault's refusal of Kant's universalism when it comes to the determination of these conditions of knowledge.

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<sup>95</sup> See also Foucault, Michel. *Politics Philosophy Culture: Interviews and Others Writings, 1977-84*, translation by Alan Sheridan and al. Edited by Lawrence D. Kritzman. New York: Routledge. P. 88..

For Foucault, knowledge is *spatially* and *historically* determined, which is not the same thing as saying that space and time are aprioristic categories framing the intuitions by which we apprehend empirical reality. Because knowledge is always contingently situated in terms of historicity and locality, it cannot legitimate *a priori* any specific epistemic framework over all others. Historicity plays therefore a crucial role in Foucault's critical *ethos*. Although Foucault is often considered a "spatial" thinker emphasizing, for instance, visibility or diagrammatic configurations, temporality plays a determinant role in his reversal of Kant's consecration of time and space as forms of intuition and his critique of phenomenology. As David Couzens Hoy reminds us:

The thoroughly temporal character of Foucault's thought is difficult to see at first *because it can be found in so many aspects of his work*. Although as an archaeological or descriptive historian he concerns himself with making philosophical points by studying the past, as a genealogical or critical historian he writes the "history of the present" (Hoy 2009, p. 208. My italics)<sup>96</sup>

Sergei Prozorov offers an excellent example of this tendency to hyper-spatialize Foucault's thought. His interpretation of Foucault's ontology of freedom displays a diagrammatic account of relations of power, which he describes as never fully capable of framing the Self viewed as this "sovereign" entity in a Schmittian sense (as a maker of the exception by which a regime of subjectification is both enabled and negated): a "Self" genuinely "free" because it is ultimately capable of eschewing all preoccupations with the question of identity, self-discovery or actualization in favour of an experience of being beside ourselves at the limit of any given diagram of power, "as the infinite potentiality for being that cannot be subsumed under any identity" (Prozorov 2007, p.151). Although Prozorov's analysis offers many great insights, his diagrammatic account of Foucault's ontology of freedom assumes a formalization

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<sup>96</sup> The emphasis is mine.

of Foucault's ontology which a closer reading of Foucault's treatment of historicity makes ultimately impossible. More precisely, the geometrization of Foucault's thought by Prozorov frames Foucault's ontology of freedom in a way that generates a geometrical answer; namely, a formal, abstract, absolute and atemporal definition of what a genuine "free subject" is. In other words, Prozorov is defining what is precisely indefinable for Foucault; freedom does not have to conform to a diagrammatic model or blueprint imagined by Prozorov as always the same across the span of time (thus a geometrical type of answer); freedom is rather actualized contingently in relations (rather than diagrams) of power of which historicity forbids any final definition or closure; for even the models or metaphors we use to make sense of the relation between what we call power and freedom are subject to historical change within Foucault's ontological reading. Any meta-blueprints of *the* subject, its freedom or its meta-capacity to resist, are always *already* outdated by Foucault's ontological contextualism, supported here by his historical ontology.

#### 4. From Historical *a priori* to Historical Ontology

The relation between Foucault's critical *ethos* and historicity is both complex and fascinating. It deserves to be briefly unpacked here. Foucault's ontological reading of historicity can be found in *the Archaeology of knowledge* under the form of his notion of *historical a priori*; in *The Order of Things* under the form of *episteme*; and in later genealogical work under the form of historical ontology. More precisely, the "temporal character" of Foucault's thought informs his exploration of the problem of the conditions of possibility of knowledge (*savoir*); his treatment of the problem of the transformation of knowledge (as *episteme*); and his examination of the problem of the internalizations of various power\knowledge and ethical practices which are posited as always *historically* and *spatially* situated. In Hoy's words, Foucault is adopting the framework of "modern temporality" throughout his work, a

temporality which Hoy describes as produced “through the conflict that results when the closure that the materiality of the past would impose on the present is opened up by the processes of desubjectification” (Hoy 2009, p. 208). It is by evoking the effects of such temporality that Foucault criticizes the idealist position which makes knowledge the outcome of some psychological characteristics or rational predispositions of a “human nature.” A universal human nature endowed with pre-given faculties is at best an historical and cultural construct for Foucault.

Modern temporality also enables Foucault to sidestep what would otherwise be the trap of historical or empirical determinism. Although temporality certainly exists and may be appreciated through its effects (the irreversibility of past events for instance), it is not an empirical object in and of itself. Temporality certainly frames our experiences from an aprioristic standpoint, but it does not imprint a specific finality or pre-given direction to it. Furthermore, modern temporality plays a crucial role in Foucault’s reversal of Kant’s conception of the moral agent as something universalizable, apt for all rational beings. As Ian Hacking puts it:

On the contrary, [for Foucault] we constitute ourselves *at a place and time*, using materials that have a distinctive and *historically formed organization*. The genealogy to be unravelled is how we, as peoples in civilizations with histories, have become moral agents, through constituting ourselves as moral agents in quite specific, *local historical ways* (Hacking 2002, p. 3. Italics are mine).

Modern temporality thus offers the framework that Foucault needs in order to ground the possibility of human knowledge by combining Kant’s aprioristic notion of *forms of intuition* with the positivity and contingency of *historicity* (Han 2002, p. 41). Such a solution provides Foucault with an underlying systematicity (a given historicity as the form of our intuition)

against which he can then account for the possibility and cross-examination of contingent modes of knowledge (*episteme*) without giving the impression that he embraces any transcendental or a-historical universal principles to do so. As such, what Foucault describes as an historical *a priori* is neither universal nor invariant. The notion of an historical *a priori* rather points toward the historical transformations that the archaeological, then the genealogical method attempts to identify (Han 2002, p. 45).

Foucault's usage of what Hoy describes as "modern temporality" did not, however, emerge immediately in Foucault's work. The conflictual aspect of modern temporality is a late addition to Foucault's archaeological account of temporality, marking the beginning of the genealogical era. This addition represents a solution to Foucault's first attempt to formulate the scope of his historico-nominalism which ran into a number of problems leading to important modifications in Foucault's account of historicity in relation to ontology. As Béatrice Han explains it, the notion of historical *a priori* we find in the Preface of *The Birth of the Clinic* poses the problem for its author of having to justify the phenomenological language of perception it displays (Han 2002). In other words, Foucault is pressed to situate the locus of such perception between the empirical (the body) and the transcendental (the consciousness); a tension Foucault attempts to solve by abandoning the language of perception altogether (found for instance in his account of an epistemology of "seeing"), privileging instead a strict historical analysis of the relations between words and things, and the epistemic configurations by which different experiences of "order" emerge (Foucault 1966). But far from solving the tension between the transcendental and the empirical, such displacement now presses Foucault to account for the ontological distinction his methodology presupposes between "words" and "things": that is their ontological autonomous existence, and the mysterious "void" from which language speaks. *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) thus offers the

solution of an even more radical form of historico-nominalism, in which the notion of “things” is traded for the one of “objects” produced by discourses (hence the concept of discursive *practices*), moving to a purely discursive analysis distancing itself from the use of any referent: this by deducing the notion of identity from the “set of rules” that allows their historical formation (Han 2002, pp. 53-54).

##### 5. Empiricism and Transcendentalism: Modern Pas de Deux

Yet Foucault is still under considerable pressure to legitimate the critical dimension of his renewed historico-nominalism. If there is no transcendental or universal standpoint from which we can critically assess the conditions of our existence (discursive or not), the question then becomes: where can we locate or what would explain the possibility of our critical abilities and reflective autonomy? Foucault could be tempted to indulge here in radical empiricism to explain the provenance of our thoughts as mere epiphenomena of the positive and concrete processes we find in the world, which, by their unstable, finite and contingent Nature would imprint similar qualities on our thought (then capable of being differentiated and critically contrasted). But, such a solution does not explain how our consciousness emerges as an act of synthesis of these different qualities, especially if we agree that no discrete “thing” captured by our sense data can explain (on its own) why Reality appears to us from an integrated perspective. In fact, to explain the provenance of our thoughts (or consciousness) by referring to the empirical does not really solve the ontological problem of origin; it mostly leaves unanswered the question of the provenance of the empirical. More disturbing, the spectre of empirical determinism risks annihilating the very possibility of an autonomous consciousness, capable of exercising free will and being held accountable for the actions it chooses. As such, it risks jeopardizing Foucault’s invitation to resist the various

modes of domination we may encounter by emptying the concept of freedom of any real significance.

This tension between empiricism and transcendentalism does not only haunt Foucault's methodology (or Kant's for that matter); it haunts, as we illustrated in the last chapter, the entire edifice of modern thought trapped between the adoption of a scientific and positivistic paradigm that has dismantled piece by piece the tradition of speculative metaphysics in favour of some deterministic reductions of the principle of causality according to strict materialistic and historical accounts on the one hand; and the need to salvage the critical, free and progressive rationalistic capacities of the scientist from such determinism on the other hand. A similar tension can be found at the heart of Foucault's historico-nominalism, both in its archaeological and genealogical aspects. It haunts, for instance, the notion of "statement" upon which Foucault grounds his archaeological analysis: a "statement" defined alternatively as a function of itself, and as the somewhat positive element of *that* which it claims to identify. Foucault's notion of statement thus succumbs to what Beatrice Han describes as "the confusion specific to the empirico-transcendental double," which leads Foucault to endorse this strange notion of "regularities which regulate themselves" (Han 2002, pp. 64-66). Foucault's circular nominalism represents in fact a desperate attempt to solve the problem of the conditions of possibility of knowledge in non-subjective terms, while avoiding the trap of adopting either an empirical or a transcendental ontology. But such solution fails as we see Foucault the Archaeologist hard pressed to justify his own use of the notion of identity and locating the provenance of our experiences: two problems that a historico-nominalism framed by Kant's epistemology (according to which our experiences ought to be understood either as *a priori* or *a posteriori*) cannot seem to shake off.

## 6. Not Only Historical, But Interested: Will as Ontological Determinant

It is here that Foucault, here more influenced by Nietzsche than by Kant, embraces a genealogical understanding of knowledge posited not only as “historical,” but also as “interested.” Foucault’s genealogical notion of *historicity* would now enframe a *will to truth* rather than the *archaeological positivity of statements* as the primal condition of possibility accounting for the transformation of knowledge (*savoir*): a “will to truth” understood as always contingent, situated and entangled into power dynamics, making a value-free or neutral knowledge virtually impossible.<sup>97</sup> The perspectives we hold “as knowledge” would not only be ontologically framed by their own historicity (as events); their non-metaphysical origin would be found in the radical contingency of “acts of will” by which Foucault is able to sidestep the questions of ontological beginnings and identity harassing his previous archaeological method.

All forms of knowledge would be “interested” in the sense of being intertwined with various power struggles fuelled by “acts of will” battling ultimately over the determination of what ought to be the “truth.” In other words, the conditions of possibility of knowledge would be inherently contingent and finite; they would resist all attempts to transcendentalize, aprioritize or universalize the basis of our experience of truth. Replacing the notion of *episteme*, the genealogical concept of *dispositif* offers a “grid of intelligibility” making visible what constitutes a heterogeneous nexus of discursive and non-discursive practices, which allows Foucault to isolate the significant relationships which govern these practices, while problematizing by the same token what constitutes for us the *present* (Owen 1994, p. 149). In sum, the voluntary and unpredictable character of the “will of truth” would be tied to a historical enfolding through which it introduces *difference* from the height of a *present* made

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<sup>97</sup> As we shall see in our next sections, these two notions (historicity and will) can be found at the core of the metaphysical decisions informing the Christian doctrine of Creation, a doctrine which has shaped in important respect notions such as free will, finitude, historicity, and determinacy.

uncomfortable with its certainties: this by making us aware of the sheer contingency of our being what we are.

### 7. Historical Ontology and the Question of Nature

We are now in a better position to understand why Nature understood as anything but a “historico-nominalist construction generated by conflicting wills over the notion of truth” can only be discarded as a naïve metaphysical entity by Foucault and his followers. We are also in a better position to identify the ontological and epistemological commitments that such a Foucaultian position entails. Endorsing explicitly or implicitly Foucault’s methodology implies conceiving subject-matters such as metaphysics, ontology, historicity, culture, Nature, freedom and subjectivity in a very specific way. Foucault’s tool box does not come without strings, implications and even limitations. It is not simply a matter of picking something Foucaultian in the mix to spice up one’s critique. By adopting Foucault’s style of critique (archaeological or genealogical), scholars often embrace ontological commitments whose implications they often ignore or chose to silence. Foucault’s notion of historical ontology is a perfect example of this.

To be clear, I am not contesting the fact that historical ontology is a great analytical tool helpful for deepening our understanding of politics in relation to the concept of truth.

Historical ontology allows us to connect the historical emergence of various games of truth and falsity with the ways we govern ourselves and others in often illuminating ways. By bringing to light the contingent and historical *conditions of effectiveness* by which regimes of truth and regimes of government merge together, historical ontology helps us to better understand the reversible and open-ended exchanges between what Foucault describes as “regimes of truth,” “regimes of the self” and “practices of freedom.” As such, historical

ontology produces powerful analyses which unpack in often creative ways something as intimate as the experience of our consciousness or the certainties upon which we base the experience of our subjectivity.<sup>98</sup> As Owen summarizes it:

The *actual* ways in which we constitute ourselves as subjects of knowledge govern the ways in which we can reflect on others and ourselves and, thereby, define a field of *possible* ways of acting on others and ourselves; while, at the same time, the *actual* ways in which we act on others and ourselves govern the possible ways in which we can constitute ourselves as subject of knowledge. Viewed in this way, Foucault's project of historical ontology may be situated as a mode of accounting for the emergence and development of the *structures of recognition* constitutive of our subjectivity through a tracing of the movement from fields of possibility to patterns of actuality in the interplay of structures of consciousness and structures of the will (Owen 1994, p. 156).

Furthermore, Foucault's account of the relationships between truth and subjectivity, as well as his agonistic understanding of freedom, are often celebrated as welcome additions to the critique of what is understood as the tyranny of pre-constituted fact, the diffusion of interests masked as universal or aprioristic truths, and the various attempts to control and regulate our behaviour. Foucault is often admired as the defender of an irreducible and indefinable freedom conceived as perpetual renewal according to formulations such as "the only guarantee to freedom is freedom itself" (Foucault 2010, p. 245; quoted in Tully 1999, p. 138). Foucault is also held in high esteem by many postcolonial and anarchist scholars, sympathetic to Foucault's sensitivity to the social, cultural and historical contingencies by which the conditions of possibility of standing hegemonic truths are often fabricated and enforced.

My argument, however, is that Foucault's notion of historical ontology still contains a number of metaphysical assumptions which remain problematic from an ecological and

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<sup>98</sup> As Foucault summarizes it: "First a historical ontology of ourselves in relation to truth through which we constitute ourselves as subjects of knowledge; second, a historical ontology of ourselves in relation to a field of power through which we constitute ourselves as subjects acting on others; third, a historical ontology of ourselves in relation to ethics through which we constitute ourselves as moral agents" (Foucault 2010, p. 51).

multi/cross/intercultural perspective. Contrary to its anti-metaphysical posturing, I suggest that Foucault's historical ontology is predicated upon the metaphysical *and* universal assumption that *all* that exists is framed by its own historicity. In other words, all beings would necessarily emerge and pass in a Heraclitean flux that refuses to any historical being the closure of a permanent self-referent identity. The universal condition of historicity that enframes all beings forbids any universalistic and aprioristic predication of anything of historical existence. In sum, all experience would be framed and limited by its own historicity.

By circumscribing the positive contours of discursive formations which belong to given historical periods, Foucault's archaeological method attempted to track, isolate and contrast the epistemological rules and regularities (*episteme*) which govern what statements are understood as true or false: rules and regularities which also shape behaviours, worldviews, formalizations, ethics, and subjectivities in important respects. Foucault's historico-nominalism gives the impression that Foucault is avoiding any metaphysical commitment by shielding himself through the claim that *all contexts of emergence of any truth* are necessarily historical (hence finite, positive and contingent). One problem haunting Foucault's historico-nominalism, however, is to account for the transformation of an *episteme* without reintroducing a transcendental consciousness that would stand outside its historical enframing. A consequence of this is that only the past is open to synthetic analysis for Foucault: not from an understanding that historical records do reflect objectively what *really* did happen in the past, but rather from the understanding that these records offer positive "discursive traces," which, following Foucault's genealogical later readjustment, find their ontological origin in "acts of will"; *acts of will that have been formulating various "truths" upon which the authority or meanings of different practices depends*. It is thus by introducing non-discursive practices which are ontologically based in our "acts of will" that Foucault accounts for the

transformations of the different historical configurations of knowledge without reintroducing metaphysical elements, which, for Foucault, means to stay within the limits of immanent historical practices as a source of explanation of change and transformation.

The relationship between our “acts of will” and the question of truths is thus crucial to Foucault’s critical project. The relationship between the two is in fact simple: if we accept that the “truths” by which we understand our past have been shaped by “acts of will”, then we must accept that these “acts of will”—because of their contingent Nature—could have been different or otherwise. No “truth” would therefore be necessary from an existential standpoint. Hence, what we conceive as our “present” or contemporaneity would be more open to change than we often assume it is. In other words, our understanding of what constitutes “the present” would be the outcome of contingent “acts of will” that could have been otherwise. History is thus not ruled by necessary or strictly deterministic causal relations, but would rather unfold according to “acts of will” that have formulated various “truths” we now *believe* are necessary and universal. By framing the conditions of possibility of truth as a mixture of will and historicity, Foucault can thus avoid the accusation of historical determinism without reintroducing a standpoint *outside* history to justify the existence of our consciousness and intrinsic freedom. It is as such that Foucault embraces what I have called an *ontology of praxis* which operates within the framework of an *historical ontology* according to which our practices—themselves caused by “acts of will”—grounds the condition of possibility of our experience of truth at an ontological level.

Foucault’s commitment to an *historical ontology* and an *ontology of praxis* not only grants a historical and interested status to *the conditions of possibility* of the various “games of truth” by which we shape our behaviours; such a commitment also plays a determinant role in

Foucault's assumption that freedom is irreducible to practices of power. To be clear, Foucault is not rejecting the possibility of predicating universality or even aprioristic judgements *when it occurs within the context of justification* of the various "games of truth," which are based upon the acceptance of specific premises and logical implications (which is the same thing as saying that the Universal actually *exists* as a thing). *Within* the limits of contexts of justification, premises posited as self-evident, aprioristic or universal truths are certainly possible, and even useful to the resolution of specific problems (i.e. mathematical problems). Foucault's historical ontology rather targets *the context of emergence and effectiveness* that exceeds the framework of rules and regularities found *within* these "games of truths" we often mistakenly hold to be fundamental at an ontological level.

Foucault here is clearly adopting the criterion of "effect" to discriminate what stands as real from what is only fictitious. As David Couzens Hoy puts it, Foucault's methodological nominalism "does not entail that universals do not have real effects. [...] From a fictitious relation, Foucault maintains, a real subjection can be born" (Hoy 2009: p. 235). Hence, Foucault is less concerned with the truth or falsity of universal statements, than with the power of universality to justify and enforce modes of domination which are described as lacking the possibility of any reversal or contestation. Foucault's concern with universality is mainly political, not analytical and certainly not ontological in the classical sense of the term. More precisely, Foucault's concern is with the ontological possibility of human Freedom (or its non-determination). For Foucault, freedom cannot be completely determined by any power dynamics. Here power is basically understood by Foucault in terms of attempts to "conduct conducts;" it must therefore presuppose, for Foucault, what it wishes to influence as already existing. In other words, power can certainly try to bend or shape freedom in this or that way, but it cannot purely subjugate freedom. Freedom in fact stands as a central component of all

power dynamics; something we can prove, according to Foucault, if we look at the extraordinary efforts deployed by agents of power to shape freedom in this or that way. Freedom is not viewed as the opposite of a repressive power by Foucault, but rather as a *potentiality* that gets *actualized* only through power dynamics.

Ontologically speaking, the origin of freedom can be traced back to these impermanent, finite and historical nodules of reality emerging through these “acts of will,” depicted by Foucault as forming the basis of our dynamic reality. An “act of will” is contingent because it is fundamentally unpredictable; it precedes or can always *potentially* refuse, transform, adapt or replace any given finality. This potentiality would exceed the capacity of any overarching rationality to predict its outcome. An “act of will” would be finite because its actualization always takes place as an “event” in an irreversible temporality. Hence, Foucault’s comprehension of reality *and* freedom both assume an ontology which posits our “acts of will” as their ultimate origin: an ontology which resists all formalization or aprioristic formulation by holding the object of our will power as being spontaneous, unpredictable, contingent and self-generating (i.e., as *causa sui*). The self-reflective knowledge of this state of contingency would be possible by virtue of the historical imprints left by our “acts of will” actualised *in time* through *their becoming* in various power dynamics and “regimes of truth.” There is therefore no need to understand consciousness or freedom from a transcendental standpoint for Foucault. On the contrary, the consciousness of our freedom is rather the outcome of historical, transient and immanent processes understood as “acts of will” by which we can grasp the contingency of what made our being in the past (or the “truths” by which we understand ourselves in relation to past events). This process reveals the openness of a *present* made up of contingencies and various “acts of will” forming the “truths” we often take for granted toward an undetermined future.

## 8. Governmentality and Historical Ontology

We are now in a better position to understand the close relation between historical ontology and governmentality studies. More precisely, we are in a better position to understand how historical ontology provides the theoretical framework which makes governmentality studies possible. Governmentality studies rest on examining historical practices, which, as we have just explained, are conceived by Foucault as the products of irreducible and singular “acts of will.” These “acts of will” generate various “regimes of truth” which are then endorsed, overturned or modified by immanent “practices of freedom.” These practices of freedom also originate from “acts of will” no overarching rationality of government can completely predict. No overarching rationality could therefore pretend to tell us what the consequences of our political activities will be. Hence the historical transformations we witness would not be the outcomes of any preordained rationality, teleology or overarching truth; they would rather be the outcomes of conflicting and immanent “acts of will” struggling over the definition or determination of “truth.”

By adopting an historical ontology, Foucault not only discards the Platonic quest for the essences or *Eidos* behind “things;” he is also attempting to free Critique from the traditional opposition between appearance and reality which has haunted Western philosophy since at least the beginning of Greek philosophy. As a declared anti-metaphysician, Foucault is opposing both Hegelianism and Husserlian phenomenology, which he sees as reintroducing aprioristic assertions that would frame our experience of truth in dogmatic ways. He also refuses radical empiricism as a viable solution to account for the problem of experiencing “truth” and the possibility of its transformation. The problem of empirical determinism and the Nietzschean assertion that even positive science rests on some “articles of faith” forbid

Foucault to simply become a “happy positivist.” Haunted by the spectres of Essence and Origin, Foucault’s solution consists in accounting for the condition of possibility of knowledge (*savoir*) by placing ontology under the *aegis* of two principles that can neither be subsumed under any rationalization nor determined by positivity alone: historicity and will power.

My contention, however, is that historical ontology does not fully escape the problem of accounting for the condition of possibility of knowledge, subjectivity or freedom in non-metaphysical terms; it only generates a renewed metaphysic, or more precisely a renewed ontology—if by ontology we understand the positing of some first and irreducible principles by which one accounts for a comprehensive understanding of Reality. By wanting to get rid of the metaphysical “I-ness” which has haunted modern philosophy since at least Descartes (and the object\subject epistemology *and* anthropology it consecrates), Foucault is externalizing the axiomatic tendency we find at the heart of modern *episteme*, which, in subsequent leaps, went from freeing itself from onto-theological tutelage by grounding the possibility of knowledge in the Subject alone (as the fundamental axiom of all knowledge), to the adoption of a *postmodernist* metaphysics holding *historicity* (rather than the Subject) as *that* by which we can free ourselves from the manacle of both modern subjectivism and the residue of aprioristic formulations through a temporal process (or unfolding) believed to be irreducible both to the transcendental universalism and empirical determinism. More precisely, Foucault is externalizing the metaphysical base we find in the Cartesian consecration of a pure form of subjectivity (the Subject of pure thinking)—a similar metaphysical base later found despite his strong critique of Descartes in Kant’s aprioristic forms of intuition—by evoking an external element, *historicity*, which frames the Cartesian subject in terms of finitude, location and contingency, making impossible the universal and aprioristic consecration of the Subject;

hence the task of the genealogist is to think such historicity in order to expose the contingency of our modes of thinking, while positioning our will vertical to itself as a potential source of creation for an undetermined future.

In other words, Foucault's genealogical method is basically an attempt to overcome modern metaphysics and its consecration of Pure Reason within a "regime of truth" whose ontology is predominantly configured by what Heidegger describes as *mathemata*. For Heidegger, the notion of *mathemata* is not reducible our common use or understanding of mathematics; it rather designates the mathematization of our experience of Reality emerging through the Scientific Revolution from the seventh centuries onward. Such mathematization would operate according to the principle "that it cannot have anything in front of it, and it cannot allow what might be given to it beforehand;" stating here the non-empirical and not-immediately-evident nature of mathematical axioms that Heidegger sees at play in Descartes' *Dubito* and *Cogito* (Heidegger 2008, p. 302).

As we have discussed in our last chapter, Descartes is viewed by Heidegger as one of the instigators of this modern metaphysic operating under the aegis of the *mathemata*. In fact, Descartes' *Dubito* incarnates the essence of this renewed metaphysic in its famous rejection of both our sense data and our "common sense" as that which may secure the possibility of a *Prima Philosophia*. The epistemology of Scholastic Aristotelianism is basically rejected by Descartes in favour of a methodology based on analytical geometry in particular, and mathematical reasoning in general. The outcome of his *Dubito*, the *Cogito*, sets the trajectory of a modern way of thinking obsessed by its duty to account for the conditions of possibility of knowledge: namely, a philosophy dominated by the need to erect a theory of knowledge before a theory of the world (hence a philosophy which puts epistemology before ontology).

The *Cogito* would embody for Heidegger this moment by which thinking becomes determined by the mathematical preoccupation of retaining only the general and most abstract proposition, in the sense of a thinking that purely asserts itself as the ontological foundation of all thinking (Heidegger 2008, p. 302). In sum, the Cartesian “I think” would not be the *consequence* of the thinking, but the very *condition of possibility* of modern thinking, the *fundamentum*, which, for Heidegger, is not a mere affair of usage or method, but a radical change of *Dasein*; that is to say a radical change in “the clearing of the Being of beings on the basis of the mathematical” (Heidegger 2008, p. 304).

For Foucault, to hold the Cartesian Subject as the centerpiece of ontology is to forget that the Subject is first and foremost a historical being (whose thinking is always spatially and historically situated *and* interested). In other words, even the Cartesian Subject is itself a historical, hence finite and contingent idea. And yet, it can be argued that Foucault’s understanding of historicity is modulated by the same *ethos* that informed Descartes’ *Cogito*. Clearly, historical ontology obeys the same principle as the *Dubito/Cogito*: namely, that its truth “cannot have anything in front of it, and it cannot allow what might be given to it beforehand.” It can thus be argued that Foucault’s notion of historicity is rerouting what Heidegger identified as the *mathemata*; only this time via the notion of a temporality that asserts itself as the condition of possibility *and* effectiveness of all thinking, hence as the new centre of a *post* modern ontology.

Of course, the concept of the *mathemata* as a dominant feature of the *Dasein* of modernity can help to explain the project from which Foucault attempts to distance himself. It is clear that Foucault is critical of Cartesianism and other phenomenological attempts to consecrate any Archimedean point to ground modern philosophy in metaphysical terms. Yet it appears that

the influence of *mathemata* still informs the notion of historicity which both Foucault and Heidegger use to develop their critique of the metaphysical tendencies of modern ontology. To externalize the conditions of possibility of knowledge and freedom by evoking the existence of an overarching historical mode of being is still to posit a universal metaphysical principle. The main flaw with such a metaphysical claim consists in positing a specific understanding of time as *the* real time per se. More precisely, the universalism at play in historical ontology lies in the principle by which it frames everything that exists through its own temporality, making everything that exists a finite and contingent reality. The problem is that the notions of finitude and contingency informing historical ontology are not neutral or value-free; they are rather the product of a specific cosmology and cultural itinerary.

## 9. Discussion and Conclusion

We can certainly find other ways of relating to time which are not pre-loaded with the ontological implications of finitude and contingency found in historical ontology. Many Greek philosophers, for instance, related in a very different way to time, mostly by assuming that Nature is eternal, a cosmological assumption evacuated for theological reasons by monotheistic doctrines of Creation. At first glance, the recognition of such diversity does not seem to be a problem for historical ontology. My argument, however, is that such diversity is implicitly negated by the way in which historical ontology reduces all other cosmologies and systems of knowledge to finite and contingent historical constructions, stripping from them any rightful claim to universalism or transcendentalism by virtue of their own historicity. From a cultural perspective, it is clear that historical ontology neither offers nor tolerates any alternative to its representation of reality. For its critical power to stay uncompromised, historical finitude and contingency must be posited as universal and aprioristic qualities affecting everything that exists in time. Only if the positivity and finitude of historical time is

considered universal can Foucault use historicity as an ontological stepping stone to claim the predominance of contingency—justifying by the same token our capacity of being otherwise in the future. In other words, Foucault must posit historicity as universal if he wants to adumbrate the notion of a consciousness fabricated by its own historicity, yet not plainly determined by it.

It can be suggested that finitude and contingency are for Foucault the new aprioristic “forms of intuition” which inform the experience of a being whose mode of existence is necessarily historical. It can also be suggested that historicity is, in Newtonian fashion, the objective and positive condition in which our consciousness evolves irrespective of its culture or worldview on time. Hence the question remains the same as the one that haunted Kant centuries before: how should we conceive Foucault’s ontological notion of historicity? Should we conceive historical finitude and contingency as aprioristic and universal rules informing the way in which our consciousness apprehends Reality? Or as positivistic assumptions according to which the time we experience is the only real and objective one there is? As we can see, this question is impossible to answer without reintroducing a grand metaphysical claim from either side. Either we accept that finitude and contingency are aprioristic rules which determine our apprehension of Reality regardless of time and culture; or we accept that there is an objective and positive temporality which precedes and frames the activities of our consciousness. From an intercultural standpoint, this unsolvable tension between Idealism and Realism appears to offer only two solutions to non-Western cultures holding different understandings of time or cosmology. Either they accept that their culture is contained by a temporal process their worldview is ignorant about; or they accept that their understanding of time and their culture as a whole is a historical, hence finite and contingent, construction in which case any universal or metaphysical claim they may have must be acknowledged as an

illusion. In both cases, non-Western cultures are condemned to suffer from our ontological dilemma, hard-pressed to accept either one of these understandings of historicity as the right one.

Ironically, by wanting to neutralize the universalism and transcendentalism by which a culture can restrict the freedom of individuals to invent themselves differently, Foucault's historical ontology has created an ontology that is not only based on universal and metaphysical claims (universal historicity in terms of finitude and contingency), but also on an ontology that leans dangerously on the verge of cultural domination. As I shall argue in the next chapter, historical ontology not only is not viable from an intercultural perspective; from an ecological standpoint it also suffers from a deep seated anthropocentrism. Historical ontology suffers from anthropocentrism, I shall argue, because it demotes our experience of Nature to merely conceptual and historical constructions, leaving no room to interact with the life forces and experiential encounters we find in Nature other than as passive realities when it comes to the meanings they contribute to generate. The act of subsuming ontology to historicity turns the various worldviews we find in the world from different existential expressions of "being-with" to mere "world pictures" through their historical objectification; turning everything in Nature—including their various ways we relate to Being or Nature at a fundamental level—into mere images or constructs (Heidegger 2008, p. 311).

## Chapter 6

### Foucault and the Metaphysical Heritage of the Christianity

#### 1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I suggested that Foucault's critical *ethos* deploys a specific understanding of temporality and will power, the two of which are metaphysically posited as ontological principles by Foucault. I argued that these principles constitute the ontological foundation for Foucault's historico-nominalism as well as the ontological backdrop of his governmentality studies. I also argued that Foucault's historical ontology relies on a concept of temporality (understood in terms of finitude and contingency) and an understanding of will power which are both posited metaphysically. In other words, for Foucault, all possible human experiences are framed by finitude and contingency in virtue of their own historicity, and are ontologically caused by "acts of will" which resist any attempt to formulate universal or aprioristic explanations or truths as to their outcomes. Now we know that Foucault's thought has already been criticized for a historicism "too firmly entrenched" in an experiential basis. This experiential basis would still be too phenomenological—too metaphysical—for some scholars sympathetic to Foucault's work. As Thomas Flynn puts it:

[...] the chief difficulty with the Foucaultian project as history arises from the fact that, to speak like a nominalist, the lived, experienced time of the responsible agent is too firmly entrenched; it is, to use more comfortable terms, an essential ingredient in our human condition. [...] No doubt Foucault indicated the inadequacy of simple narrative account, although he did so with great rhetorical (narrative) skills. [...] *But his suspicions have not rooted out the experiential basis of historical narrative.* Indeed, his own narratives have served to underscore its inevitability (Flynn 2005, p 46. The italic is mine).

Although I agree with Flynn that Foucault's historicism is problematic, I contend that Foucault's imperfect nominalism or phenomenological tendencies are what should be blamed here. I rather hold that Foucault's conjunction of nominalism and historicism (historico-nominalism) as formulated in his notion of an historical *a priori*, and later his notion of historical ontology (historico-nominalist-praxis), is what should be carefully monitored if we wish to find any metaphysical residues in Foucault's thought. To be clear, for many concepts describing (and often prescribing) what constitute sociably acceptable behaviours, I agree that Foucault's historico-nominalism offers a powerful critique. Understanding well the argument of Ian Hacking stating that his concern with historical ontology regards these "objects or their effects which do not exist in any recognizable form until they are objects of scientific study," I do not quarrel with the project of studying the history of how various concepts came to emerge and organize our lives (Hacking 2002, p. 11).<sup>99</sup> But I contend that "Nature" cannot be reduced to one of the objects designated here by Hacking. Nor do I accept the passive nature attributed to the objects which are "not yet recognised under any form by science" (which Hacking nevertheless assumes exist); presupposed here to be formed and changed by "our universals" in a manner suggesting a one-way relationship.<sup>100</sup>

To sweep Nature under the rug as meaningless unless humans give it a meaning, as leading green governmentality scholar Timothy Luke is suggesting, is not only to endorse a particularly crude version of anthropocentrism; it is to ignore this whole underside of an equation which implies that, while humans certainly attribute different meanings to Nature, they are nevertheless relating to "something" while they are conceptualizing "Nature," which here is not a passive entity or entities waiting for humans to shape it the way they want

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<sup>99</sup> See for instance (Davidson 2004), (Poovey 1998), (Biagioli 1994), (Schaffer and Shapin 1989), (Buchwald 1994), (Gaukroger 2006).

<sup>100</sup> How does Hacking *knows* that these objects "not yet recognised under any form by science" nevertheless exist remains quite an obscure assumption that Hacking never fully addresses in his book (Hacking 2002).

without any consequence beyond their business, but an active field of living, intelligent and interrelated forces responding to human activity (or passivity). I therefore find it more helpful to interrogate Nature not in causal terms of “what would precede what” (Nature as *either* a pre-conceptual reality *or* a conceptual construct), nor in terms of essence versus existence (to then delineate the truth of Nature), but as this relational matrix within which we are perpetually interacting and negotiating the meanings of what this relation with Nature could be. I shall describe this relational mode in greater detail in the next chapter.

In this chapter, I examine the notions of finitude and contingency which inform Foucault’s concept of historical ontology. I suggest that these two notions can be traced back to some core “metaphysical decisions” rooted in the Christian doctrine of Creation, which, I argue, has constituted the dominant ontological horizon of Western thought at least since the Medieval period. By exploring the filiations between historical ontology and the Christian doctrine of Creation, I challenge Foucault’s notion of historicity by illustrating that his comprehension of time as historical and his ontological account of “will” are *not* self-evident and universal principles by which we can assume that anything which exists in time is necessarily finite and contingent. More precisely, I suggest that Foucault’s notion of historicity and his understanding of will are the products of a specific cultural itinerary. By decentring Foucault’s comprehension of temporality as *only one particular way* to understand human relationship to time, I wish to promote a more flexible approach to other cosmologies than our own (Western), encourage a greater respect for the relational dimensions of our experiences from a non-anthropocentric standpoint, and release the Eurocentric grip of historical ontology when it comes our comprehension of both Nature and Critique.

## 2. Ontologizing Contingency and Finitude

When it comes to its ontological assumptions, it can be suggested that the concept of governmentality (be it green or not) situates us right in the middle of the epistemological tension we find at the end of the *Order of Things*, where mankind is described by Foucault as the centrepiece of a modern *episteme* where s\he is understood both as a positive *object* of knowledge, and as the producer of such knowledge (hence the *subject*) by virtue of a consciousness which must transcend the empirical conditions of its experience if any synthesis of empirical knowledge is going to be possible (Foucault 1966, chapter 5). Quite remarkably, it can be argued that the very same problem affects the question of Nature when it comes to the difficulty for green governmentality scholars to imagine Nature beyond the tension opposing empiricism and transcendentalism: that is, when humans view themselves as both natural beings *determined* by Nature and *deciders* of what Nature means and does not mean (which involves the debate between determinism and human freedom). Adding to the complexity, Nature can also be understood as a “quasi-transcendental object,” referring both to the empirical objects we find positively in Nature, and to the ultimate condition of possibility grounding all experiences and knowledge; a condition of possibility which can only be metaphysically posited for it exceeds the reach of empirical verification (Nature as this framework containing all of our experiences).<sup>101</sup>

Following Foucault’s genealogical shift, the solution endorsed by most green governmentality scholars has been to sidestep the question of Nature as foundational, or, in Kantian terms, Nature as a “form of intuition,” by concentrating instead their research on the finite, reversible and contingent *practices* by which such a concept has been generated and politicized. As I

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<sup>101</sup> I use the term “quasi-transcendental” as Foucault uses it in *Les Mots et les Choses* (1966), here admirably summarized by Beatrice Han: a quasi-transcendental is *transcendental* “because it functions as the objective analogon of transcendental determination by operating in advance the synthesis of object of knowledge; but *quasi-transcendental* because such an access to the in-self is structurally impossible: Since they ‘have the same archaeological subsoil as criticism itself’, these metaphysics must be ‘measured by human finitude’” (Han 2005).

suggested in the last chapter, Foucault went to great lengths to cover his metaphysical tracks by abandoning his predominantly archaeological methodology in favour of genealogy. My argument, however, is that Foucault's genealogy still bears a transcendental notion of temporality inherited from the cosmological framework of the Christian doctrine of Creation, positing the condition of possibility of truth or knowledge as radically divorced from Nature: a Nature conceived ever since in terms of finitude and contingency precisely because *created* by God. Foucault's genealogy presupposes a secularised understanding of time which allows the Genealogist to frame all *episteme* by which humans understand themselves in relation to Nature in terms of finitude and contingency. In other words, all possible systems of knowledge are framed as "historical artefacts," and, as such, subsumed under the effect of a historicity which makes them necessarily finite and contingent realities: a paradoxical position if we press Foucault to accept the logical consequence that even his own understanding of time must either suffer from the same contingency (as an historical artefact), or turn out to be a new Universal truth he would certainly reject.

### 3. Foucault and the Christian Doctrine of Creation

Foucault's historical ontology and the notion of temporality we find in the Christian doctrine of Creation share more than similar features. If we look carefully at the origins of the Christian understanding of time, it appears that such a notion has been linked to the concept of Nature through the recourse of a "third party": God as the Creator of both time and Nature. Now if God is rejected as a credible explanation for the origin of time and Nature; worse, if the quest for origins is abandoned altogether, then, it appears that a secularised conception of temporality as *causa sui* has to fill God's shoes, and becomes the "third party" in order to account for (1) a causal mode of explanation for a world still believed to unfold in terms of finitude and contingency on the one hand; (2) and for the possibility of a human freedom that

would be otherwise determined solely by external causes on the other. My argument is that in Foucault's historical ontology, Godless Time plays paradoxically the role of this mysterious *substratum* that determines our finite condition, and allows us to experience indeterminacy by virtue of its openness (through its assumed directionality toward becoming). But as such, and that is the crux of the paradox here, the principle of Godless time must escape its own iron law, which otherwise would make it only a transient ontological explanation. In other words, Godless time must be more than a concept, more than a historical construct, more than an empirical object-at-hand; time has no other choice but to become this transcendental and substantive notion we see silently at play in Foucault's historical ontology.

#### 4. Heidegger and Foster: On Temporality

As I hope to illustrate, the secularised notion of temporality (or Godless time) is not only central to Foucault's historical ontology, it is what allows ultimately his critical *ethos* to be deployed. Thus, rather than reinterpreting Foucault's notion of governmentality and biopolitics by adding some green and environmental inflexions, I here suggest that the entry of Nature within the parameters of modern governmentality invites a deeper reflection about what is assumed by Foucault's use of historicity and his treatment of ontology, namely his historical ontology and his "metaphysics of will." To do so, I will contrast some elements of Greek and Christian cosmology in order to highlight the specific qualities of the temporality I claim Foucault has inherited. By contrasting the two cosmologies, I hope to illustrate that the temporal enframing of our existence in terms of contingency and finitude is the result of a number of metaphysical decisions that could have been (and sometimes have been) different. To be clear, I wish to argue that the concepts of historical finitude and contingency that inform Foucault's historical ontology are not self-evident and universal axioms that describe what reality is *per se*. Hence my question: would it be possible to unlock our understanding of

“being-into-the-world” and of “being-with-others” beyond the framework of a given historicity within which all relations, modes of being, *episteme* and experience are assumed as necessarily finite, transient and contingent? To that question, I would like to answer positively by showing that our conceptions of finitude and contingency are themselves the product of a specific worldview: a position which does not necessarily lead me to a circular argument—by fighting historicism with more historicism—if we concede that the different conceptions of temporality presuppose the grounding feature of relationality to be possible in the first place: a relationality not necessarily depicted in transcendental terms, but rather in immanent ones. In other words, the specificity and originality of a worldview would be attributed not to a temporality that would make any worldview historically finite and contingent by default, but to the intrinsic relationality of that worldview—its relational constitution—whose infinite embranchments generate a unique and open configuration.

Hence, rather than thinking the unfolding of “difference” as being guaranteed by the ongoing march of temporality understood as historical (hence ensuring the perpetual flow of finite and contingent realities), I would like to suggest that the principle of relationality can allow us to think of “differences” from a radically immanent standpoint, without any forced inclusion in any cosmological representation to begin with, or without the recourse to any “third party” outside relationality itself, if we accept that “differences” are precisely what constitute relationality on an ontological level. My suggestion is to approach Nature through relational ontologies which could potentially bypass the risk of subtle cosmological modes of domination that would work through the imposition of a specific worldview deployed through an assimilative temporality intertwined with a critical *ethos* that nobody may escape. We could therefore see Christianity (or historical ontology) as offering a singular and particular cosmological narrative, not by virtue of a transcendental historicity superseding all

cosmologies, but by virtue of the relations a cosmology has with others than itself from the outset. I will return to that topic in the second part of this chapter.

To develop my critique of historical ontology and formulate the potential solution of a relational ontology, the work of two thinkers will be brought forward: M.B Foster and Martin Heidegger.<sup>102</sup> Many scholars have already discussed the similarities and differences between Heidegger's and Foucault's philosophical project (Milchman and Rosenberg 2003). We can find, for example, many similarities between "The Age of the World Picture" and *The Order of Things*. A clear Heideggerian overtone can be found in Foucault's analysis of language, analytics of finitude, treatment of the question of the empirical and the transcendental, the cogito and the unthought, and his discourse of the being of man (Ijsseling 1986). When it comes to modernity, it has also been suggested that both thinkers share a similar critique of the modern individual as constrained by technological ordering that objectifies the real and reduces human life to the level of resource (Rayner 2004; Heidegger 1977). For both thinkers, critique would be a matter of liberating thought from its humanistic manacles, disrupting processes of social control while problematizing our relations to experience.

When it comes to the question of temporality, it can be suggested that Foucault is under the influence of a possible reading of Heidegger by clinging to a quasi-transcendental conception of temporality by which he assumes that our present is the result of a web of contingent events into which we are thrown: a web of events which determine our thinking by their precedence

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<sup>102</sup>The theologian M.B. Foster contrasted the cosmological beliefs of Christian theology with Greek cosmology in a series of articles published in the 1930s (Foster 1934; 1935; 1936). His goal was to demonstrate the filiations between the rise of modern sciences and Christian theology. Foster explored the cosmological underpinning of modern sciences, especially in regard to the empirical methodology allegedly made possible by a cosmology of Creation. See the work of C. Wybrow (1992) *Creation, Nature, and political order in the philosophy of Michael foster (1903-1959): The classic mind articles and others, with modern critical essays*. Lewiston [NY], Queenstown [ON]:E. Mellen Press.

(the thrownness in the *Dasein* in Heideggerian terms). Foucault assumes that the knowledge of our historical contingencies opens up to the possibility of understanding that the past could have been different. Such knowledge, he suggests, can empower us toward a future upon which we can act differently, today. In other words, the knowledge of freedom is conceived in terms of projecting what we presently see as past contingencies (which could have been otherwise) into a future reluctant to be theorised:

The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating: it has to be conceived as an attitude, an *ethos*, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.<sup>103</sup>

It seems clear that Foucault operates within a cosmological framework akin to Heidegger's in which Being is conceived in term of *finitude* and *contingency* in terms of *historicity* (Heidegger 1986; 1992). It should be however mentioned that that for Foucault, it is not enough to say that there has been a concealment of the differences between "Being" and "beings" that has allowed—at least since Plato—the emergence of Western metaphysics. According to Foucault, even Heidegger's story of this concealment is historical and contingent. In other words, we are not tied to it from the standpoint of some kind of ultimate origin: it is just another story, one way to understand ourselves in relation to reality. Yet such critique does not evade the cosmological framework both Foucault and Heidegger find themselves in: it only radicalizes it. Such radicalization manifests itself through the adoption by Foucault of a specific conception of time which allows him to dissolve all other cosmological and ontological understanding of reality and freedom, not as inferior

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<sup>103</sup> Foucault 2010 p. 50 ("What is Enlightenment?"). Quoted by Iain MacKenzie in "Limits, Liminality and the Present: Foucault's Ontology of Social Criticism" in *Limen. Journal for Theory and Practice of Liminal Phenomenology*, 2, 2001. The original text can be found in Derfert, D., Ewald F., Langrange, J. 2001. *Dits et écrits, volume 2: 1976-1988*. Imprimé en France: Quarto Gallimard, p. 1393 and following.

cosmologies in regard to modernity, but as contingent stories like all others. In other words, all ontological or cosmological narratives are ultimately levelled by the effects of temporality itself; all of us are forced to accept the transient character of our “cultural stories” according to a historical knowledge which precisely demonstrates the contingency of all representations of reality or Nature. All ontological or cosmological narratives are bound to become constantly something else by virtue of being historical artefacts within a historicity which address them fundamentally as finite, impermanent and contingent: a conclusion which is also reached by Timothy Luke when speaking of Nature.

##### 5. The Cultural Trap of Universalizing Historical Contingencies

My contention is that by subsuming all possible ontologies in their own historical contingencies, Foucault forecloses the possibilities of imagining ontology from a wider perspective. Reducing the study of ontology to “historical ontology” suppresses other ways of relating to time and Nature outside the framework assumed by Foucault. Hence the flaw I see in Foucault’s ontological project, which appears to assume that finitude and contingency are self-evident and universal truths about the state of the world. In other words, Foucault seems to ignore the possibility that his own ontological understanding could be the product of a specific culture. He is blind to the possibility that his own understanding of temporality is not above and beyond all possible narratives, but rather the offspring of a specific understanding of the Nature of reality, namely ontology. Foucault’s historical ontology may therefore deserve the accusation of being all too Eurocentric when it frames all other cultural narratives as mere historical artefacts, this with the consequence of making all other explanations about Nature except its own as mere transient constructions. A mono-cultural representation of Nature would thus be the danger of adopting a historical ontology positing that Nature is

always and only a transient cultural and societal construction in the process of becoming something else.

We can find among the canonical representations of Western culture various examples showing that the world (and Nature) was not always posited the way Foucault understands it. Greek cosmologies, for instance, offer great examples of such cosmological disparity. In most Greek cosmologies, time is not problematized as the source of transformation and contingency: it is neither tied to the unfolding of a *created* Nature (or Being-toward-death for Heidegger) nor to the problem of historical determinism versus the problem of voluntarism. For thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle, the problem of transformation was rather to explain the possibility and origin of movement and generation understood as the alternating of being and non-being for a single essence\matter\quiddity. Hence, the problem of finitude, contingency and corruptibility was neither primarily articulated in relation to a primordial Fall from the Garden of Eden consubstantial with the deployment of an eschatological temporality, nor in relation to the essentialist\existentialist framing of monotheist cosmologies brought forward, but rather stemmed from a logical interrogation on individualised essences which paradoxically belong simultaneously to the categories of being and not-being.

We know that for the Heidegger of *Being and Time* (1986), the different answers given by Plato and Aristotle to this problem mark the beginning of Western metaphysics. According to Heidegger, both philosophers formulated the supremacy of “Being” over “beings,” concealing ever since the difference between the two at the source of the antique question: “what is Being?” The initial project of Heidegger is therefore to re-open the question of Being through an examination of the relationship between Being and Time. Such a project prioritises time over eternity (or Being) in order to undermine the metaphysical consecration of an absolute

Being (as One) that would stand as a supreme stabilizer by which metaphysical reasoning can then circumscribe the contingency and movement which characterizes the realm of beings.

Heidegger is in fact refusing any systematic (or axiomatic) apprehension of ontology. The systematization of ontology, for Heidegger, always begins with the move of forcing an identity between being and the one, or oneness. As Smith puts it:

This identity causes being to split into separate essential and existential parts; the history of metaphysics then exhausts itself in the impossible task of reconciling and rejoining these two aspects. The solution to this problem is to view metaphysics as something that must be abandoned, its positive role can only be to make the question of being ever more poignant through the distress that it causes: this distress is heard as the cry elicited by the violation of being by metaphysics. The truth of being can only be understood as the simple letting be of being, exemplified by poetic thought that refrains from all analysis. Here being is thought of as a simple presencing, where the two aspects of the essential and the existential belong together in an undifferentiated shining forth, prior to any separation (Smith 2006).<sup>104</sup>

We can see similarities here between Heidegger's treatment of ontology and Foucault's own formulation of historical ontology. Foucault is clearly privileging the trust of historicity as this continuous unfolding of finite and contingent events, dislodging any metaphysical attempts to pose ultimate foundations to ground our ways of apprehending Reality (ontology). But evoking similarities between the methodologies of Heidegger and Foucault is not saying that they are exact replicates. Heidegger would probably criticize Foucault's historical ontology (which is predicated on a distinction between past\present\future) for assuming what he describes as the "ordinary understanding of time," which makes temporality this irreversible and homogenizing unfolding of finite events. Yet, although there are certainly differences between Foucault's and Heidegger's philosophical projects and understandings of time, it is however clear that Foucault bears the influence of Heidegger when it comes to the adoption of

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<sup>104</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy: from Enowning*. Trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1999, p. 145-6 §110:2. Quoted in Smith, Brian Anthony. 2006. "The Limits of The Subject in Badiou's Being and Event" In *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, Vol 2, No 1-2.

a notion of temporality used as a vector of critique to dislodge the privileged position of Reason (or any other grand metaphysical or transcendental concepts) that would be held above and beyond the realm of finitude and contingency, both of which are believed to be inescapable effects carried by time itself: an understanding of temporality upon which Heidegger constructed his notion of *Dasein*, and Foucault his historical ontology.

My argument is that the notion of temporality assumed by Foucault's notion of historical ontology is not only Heideggarian in tone (insisting on a primordial finitude or contingency); it is the secularised version of a cosmological position inherited from the Christian doctrine of creation. The effect of what Heidegger describes as the ordinary understanding of time carrying the world along in an irreversible (thus linear) procession of events necessarily finite and contingent by virtue of their own historicity (we can notice the circularity of the argument here) finds their origin in a cosmological story, which shifted the status of Nature from being *eternal* to being *created*, this for theological reasons alone.<sup>105</sup> In other words, our modern conception of time (ordinary or not)—the one which frames Foucault's historical ontology—is the direct consequence of a theological story describing the world as *created* by the *will* of God.

## 6. From Nature as Eternal to Created Finitude

I realize that this statement may be hard to accept for many of us who share the reassuring self-evidence offered by the conception of time I just described. This is why I deem it necessary to contrast the conceptions of temporality and rationality as formulated by the

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<sup>105</sup> The argument of a temporality engulfing the world in terms of an irreversible progression of events that are necessarily contingent and finite due to their own historicity was not circular in its origin when God and all His attributes were the logical and theological reasons why the *created* world had to be *finite* (because its Creator was believed to be the only infinite being) and *contingent* (because the world was believed to be the result of an act of will, which is contingent by Nature—God the Almighty was not obliged to create the world, hence, the creation of the world was contingent, the contrary of necessary). The secularised and self-referential version of such historicity now basically asserts that the world is made of finite and contingent events because it is historical; and it is historical because it is experienced through finite and contingent events.

Christian doctrine of creation against elements of Greek cosmology. This comparison should help us challenge the ontological and epistemological dogmas we often hold in regard to our experience of time. As Foster illustrates, we can contrast the Christian doctrine of creation, which states that Nature is *created* by the *will* of God, with the Greek cosmology which assumes by and large that Nature is eternal (Foster 1934, p. 448). The change from a Nature believed to be eternal to a created one had huge epistemological repercussions for Western culture. Because Nature was assumed to be eternal, most Greek philosophers and mathematicians (among them Pythagoras, Euclid and Plato) believed that they could *rationaly* deduce theorems of the same quality, namely theorems or reasons that were necessary, aprioristic and forever true.<sup>106</sup> To strive for genuine knowledge was therefore to establish formulations that are necessarily true, and consequently *a priori*.<sup>107</sup> Just like the observable regularity of the revolutions of the “celestial-gods” that escape the corruptibility of our sublunary world; or the returning cycle of seasons and the forever resurrecting Spring

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<sup>106</sup> We should be careful here not to suggest any unequivocal correspondence between so-called “Greek rationalism” and its modern counterpart as if we were identical things. We know, for example, that modern rationalism has been deeply influenced by the emergence of monotheism which has incorporated and reshaped elements of the Hellenist culture in very specific fashions, including the teaching of Plato and Aristotle. Foster brilliantly illustrates how the modern philosophers who celebrated the autonomy of a rationality finally emancipated from the authority of faith through notions such as “common sense” (Descartes) and the “natural lights” (Locke) were in fact experiencing an “internal revelation of what had previously been revealed externally to faith.” [...] Neither rationalist nor Empiricist philosophy was really based upon the evidence upon which it pretended to rely. No experience, to take one example, could serve as evidence to Locke of the existence of material substances, nor any reasoning demonstrate to Descartes the existence of a material world. No doubt, the assurance of ‘common sense’ might suffice for the one, and ‘natural light’ for the other. But then it must be admitted that ‘common sense’ is something other than sensation and ‘natural light’ something other than reason; and the way is open to enquiry: What is the source of that certainty which is derived neither from reason nor from the sense?” The dogmatic heritage of a Revelation which placed Modern thinkers above scepticism in the first place is Foster’s answer to this question; a dogmatism he claims was discovered by Kant, who perceived quite clearly that the whole of the ontological doctrines of modern Rationalism were covertly dependent upon the authority of Revelation, a discovery which allowed Kant to dismiss them all on such ground. But, as Foster argues, by this time the dogmatic philosophy had done their work: a body of sciences had arisen upon the presumptions which the Rationalist and Empiricist philosophers had laid down (Foster 1934, pp. 450-452).

<sup>107</sup> Of course, this is not to say that all the so-called “Greeks” were necessarily thinking along these lines, or even in an identical fashion. But while Hesiod and other orphic poets were busy tracking the cosmological origins of the Universe in the various mythical successions, another tradition of thought, which progressively imposed itself as one of the foundations of our understanding of the world, was looking essentially for what remains unchanged in the flux and succession of events. That tension between at least two traditions of thought illuminates a crucial aspect of our inherited scientific *ethos*: historical and mythical narratives were often disregarded by truth-seeker philosophers—among them Plato—for whom such narratives were often incapable of being sure either of our distant origins (hence the recourse to myths) or of the future attached to temporal succession, conceived either in linear or cyclical fashion. Hence they were lower forms of knowledge.

celebrated by the followers of Euleusis; or like the eternal regularity demonstrated by “the fact” that the sum of the angles of a triangle will always be equal to 180 degrees, the Greek understanding of proper and superior knowledge was established according to the formulation of unchanging propositions.

Let me quickly present the cases of two notorious figures among the “Greeks philosophers” to illustrate the *episteme* I am trying to unveil: Plato and Aristotle. Starting with Plato, many of us know the popular anecdote linking this philosopher to mathematics through the inscription surmounting the portal of his Academy stating that “no one shall enter if no geometer.” This insistence on geometry is not a mere caprice on the part of Plato. For geometry is first and foremost the conquest of space from an aprioristic standpoint: it is the science by which we understand the ontological platform upon which all distinct objects become intelligible through objective and universal rules. In short, geometry articulates in nominal, definitional and deductive fashion the Principle of Sufficient Reason by which we understand the framework of our experiences as absolute and unchangeable. As such, geometry allows us to experience the certainty of some principles as being not contingent, but rather eternal and necessary. For Plato, this ontological distinction demonstrated through geometry shows the existence of a greater reality distinct from the one we perceive in the sensible and unsteady world (the existence of *Eidos*). Consequently, it can be argued that the central task of the philosopher—at least from Plato onward—will be to deduce the true and eternal principles which allow him to know the true nature of the transient things of this world.

For Aristotle the problem of objective knowledge portrays itself differently. The processes of change and contingency are not the result of some form of degeneration, but the expression of the nature of each thing striving toward its own end. Hence the Truth about all things becomes

accessible in this world, in the observable and in the experimental world. Truth reveals itself in the finality of each thing, in its desire to reach a final stage of being. As such, Aristotle adopts a causal conception of Change by which every single thing transforms itself according to either an inner causation or an exterior and superior cause that affects the former nature from the outside. By associating observation and inductive reasoning, Aristotle came to the conclusion of a necessary First Mover, taking the form of this ultimate Thought that contemplates itself as *causa sui*; namely the “God of Aristotle”, which stands as the First Cause residing not outside the world as its creator, but inside the world as both its first cause and final end. Thus, Aristotle’s conception of knowledge invites us to investigate the nature of the thing itself, not by removing temporality (for every *telos* actualizes itself in time), but by analytically isolating the universal, necessary and forever true nature of a thing from the various “accidents” that may shape it as a singular expression of its universal and inherent nature.

## 7. Nature as Fallen Eden

Now if we believe with Christianity, that, on the contrary, Nature has been created by a divine act of will, then we must assume that Nature had to start somewhere, and at some point.

According to the Christian doctrine of Creation, it is an act of God that started everything there is, including Time. Time was basically launched in motion when God created the world. More precisely, Time became this universal framework in which all of Creation unfolds toward the “End of time.” Logically speaking, because the *voluntary* activity of the Creator is believed to exceed determination by reason, the rationale which would explain why the world has been created (and why it will come to an end) is also believed to exceed human rational capacity. It thus appears that Christian cosmology assumes a human deficiency when it comes to our understanding of Being; what ultimately explains Nature (i.e. the will of God) remains

unknowable from the standpoint of human reason. A fallen rationality is believed to understand only what it shares with the realm of a created Nature, namely its finite, transient and contingent Natural qualities here contrasted with the omnipotence and eternity of God's attributes, which, by the same token, assure the continuity and cognoscibility of Nature as its Origin and Redeemer.<sup>108</sup> Such an assumption leaves only two options in terms of the possibility of human knowledge: faith in Revelation and/or the use of our sense data, both of which, according to Foster, paved the way for the emergence of inductive methods based on sensuous experiences and verification by experiment, leading to the foundation of modern sciences:

[...] the contingent is knowable only by sensuous experience. If, therefore, the contingent is essential to Nature, experience must be indispensable to the science of Nature; and not indispensable merely as a stage through which the human scientist must pass on his way to attaining knowledge by reason, but indispensable because knowledge by reason cannot be adequate to a Nature which is essentially something more than an embodiment of the form [Foster refers here to the Greek cosmological notion of form versus matter]. *This 'something more', the element in Nature which depends upon the voluntary activity of God, is incapable of becoming an object to reason alone, and science therefore must depend, in regard to this element, upon the evidence of sensation [...]* and the conclusion follows that only a created Nature is proper object of an empirical science. (Foster 1934, p. 465. The emphasis is mine)

Once God is no longer seen as a credible source of justification for cosmological knowledge (or simply if anything worth enquiring into has been left out of the Scriptures), then the historicity provided by the hypothesis of God as Creator is basically sidetracked by various

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<sup>108</sup> The theological rationale given by the Scriptures (Gen, 3, 4) can be formulated as follow: (1) if God created the human will and reason following His own image, which, logically, must be nevertheless distinguishable from His in order to stand apart from Him; (2) then God necessarily created a reason that was not perfect by virtue of its mere resemblance—not identity—to God. (3) The consequence of which is: human reason was logically destined to fail. But God cannot be the instigator of such evil contradiction by virtue of His own perfection and goodness. Therefore, the Fall of humankind is attributed to an act of free will (the disobedience of Adam), much like the possibility of its redemption is attributed to an act of free will from God, out of a love that defies reason alone (for no one can be brought to perfection and still stand apart from God). Will is therefore the ultimate mechanism used by Christian theology to explain both the Fall and Redemption of humankind. An act of will has made Adam fallen from paradise, and an act of will alone (not reasoning) can save his descendents by embracing the doctrine of Christian fate.

historical records collecting evidence formulated in causal terms, but based on sense data alone. If the two types of story enter into contradiction, either the Revelation will be held as dogmatically true against the testimonies of the senses, or it will be dismissed as false. Hence Foster's conclusive argument: despite the fact that the Holy Scriptures have been steadily dismissed with the production of a knowledge based on empirical\historical evidence held against theological truths, he argues, it is nevertheless the Christian doctrine of creation that has allowed the record of empirical proofs to be received as *valid* knowledge to begin with, this by admitting that the collection of empirical data as an acceptable means to acquire inductive information in a world created by an undecieving God; this makes possible the epistemology which supported the spawning of modern science (this contrary to the Greek validation of theoretical knowledge which must be deduced from theorems that are eternally and necessarily true).

#### 8. *À la Foucault* From a Cosmological Standpoint

From the arguments made by Foster, we can better see how the Foucaultian notion of historical ontology has inherited at least two major metaphysical decisions from the Christian doctrine of creation. First, the Greek confidence in a *Logos* capable of deducing aprioristic, eternal and necessary truths from syllogistic formulations and mathematical theorems is largely dismissed by the Christian faith which asserts that only Revelation can unlock such eternal truths. In other words, Christianity has been instrumental in disseminating the now common belief among (post)modernists that the power of human reason alone cannot see beyond its own finite and contingent condition. The secularized version of this assumption, which basically rejected the inputs of Revelation, but kept intact the belief in the intrinsic fallibility of human reason to access aprioristic truths, can be seen as central to Foucault's notion of historical ontology.

Second, the conception of time within the Christian doctrine of creation implies a point of origin and a *telos* that, again, human reason alone cannot fully grasp for the simple reason that the cause of creation is believed to be an act of free will, hence necessarily contingent, and therefore not conferring knowledge that is universal. Because there is no way for human rationality to predict or deduce an act of free will (especially from God), the only way to have access to a story of origin according to Christianity is to submit one's reason to Revelation. Once again, the secularized version of this story, which rejects Revelation as a reliable source of information, but it accepts the conclusion reached by the Christian doctrine of creation about the impossibility for human reason alone to conceive of the origins and *telos* of the universe. This position (Man's will instead of God's will as sole vector of its freedom) is found at the core of Foucault's historical ontology. His ontology accepts the potentiality of empirical and historical research, but disregards as dangerous, naïve and presumptuous any research for the origin and *telos* of the historical reality he nevertheless assumes. In short, Foucault's historical ontology subscribes to both the notions of a fallible human reason and to a renewed form of voluntarism: a project, of course, purged by Foucault of any attempt to find a rational answer to the origin and *telos* of the universe, something the Christian doctrine of creation did long before him by de-rationalizing both the origin and end of history by posing the will of God as its Alpha and Omega.

Hence the Christian doctrine of creation can be seen not only as a major influence on the emergence of modern empiricism and verificationism, but also as a major influence on the temporal framework within which Foucault articulates his critical projects. It can be suggested that Foucault has basically conjugated two secularised dimensions inherited by the Christian doctrine of creation to produce the notion of historical ontology: *historicism* as the source of

both contingency and finitude. Foucault did so by invoking the power of historicism, which makes any truth contingent on the conditions of its emergence in order to exorcise the residue of universalism and progressivism found in modern rationalism. The aim is to undermine the possibility of ever thinking metaphysically again.

By all possible accounts, it is clear that Foucault relies on a quasi-transcendental horizon which allows the deployment of a genealogical critique of whatever concept we may find within the grip of history (subject, progress, truth). Although Foucault's account of temporality takes place on a strictly historical and political plane, whereas Heidegger's critique unfolds within a fundamental ontological horizon developed through the deconstruction of metaphysical tradition, the same notion of time nevertheless appears as the irreducible element for both thinkers. Time operates as this transcendental horizon which allows the possibility of thinking otherwise via the knowledge of a past that could have been different, thus mirroring an open future. In other words, Foucault's genealogical critique grounds itself in a conception of temporality which functions as its main condition of possibility, as an *a priori* condition of possibility, which his own critique cannot account for precisely because he cannot account for the *constant* temporal deployment of beings without reinserting a transcendental notion of temporality. The ultimate logical consequence is that all cosmologies are viewed as constructed through a temporal framework, which, paradoxically, no cosmology can ultimately account for. Time must either be metaphysically posited as a pre-conceptual condition for experience (historical *a priori*) or fall prey to the genealogical approach itself.

## 9. Discussion and Conclusion

Such a loophole in the activity of human thinking—that is, an activity forced to circle back on its historical contingency in order to be considered critical—makes the project of thinking Nature very problematic. Politically speaking, it is unlikely that reducing all cosmological accounts of Nature to mere cultural constructions, whose fate is to pass or become necessarily something else, will help us reach a sharable understanding of Nature. This underlines the urgency of adopting alternative paradigms capable of promoting sustainability, co-dependency and a broader state of equality between and among humans and non-humans. To value our current representations of Nature would become useless if we conceived that our actual representations of Nature are only contingent upon our epoch or particular practices. To be clear, the adoption of historical ontology would condemn us to ever-shrinking-short-term-thinking: a terrible prospect when we consider the much more long-lasting responsibilities we have to accept in order to reach ecological sustainability and preserve the regenerative powers of Nature. Ecologically speaking, reducing Nature to the passive result of what we alone imagine does not render justice to the interactive processes that we have with an active and responding Nature: this open-web of complex, mutating and intelligent forces which includes and supports our existence through dynamic and relational principles of homeostasis geared toward the enhancement and renewal of the different forms of life. It appears as such that the quasi-transcendental horizon deployed by Foucault's notion of historical ontology prevents us from thinking of Nature from the perspective of a less anthropocentric, less Eurocentric standpoint.

## Chapter 7: Toward a Relational Ontology

### 1. Introduction

At this point, we do not want to give the impression that Governmentality studies are doomed from the outset because they suffer from a number of blind spots when it comes to their cosmological and ontological assumptions about Nature. Foucaultian studies certainly offer a great contribution when it comes to the study of the complex ramifications between power formations, systems of knowledge and processes of subjectification\objectification. Eco or Green governmentality studies offer many great insights into the rise of green power\knowledge formations, the greening of biopolitics, and the dissemination of various practices of subjectification which can potentially lead to the creation of various green modes of domination. In particular, Green governmentality studies help us to better understand why the ecological movement, first emerging as a resistance to governmental authorities and corporations, has been increasingly assimilated as a political rationality under the *aegis* of what we have described as an overarching rationality of government feeding on resistance only to deepen processes of regulation and standardization. We are thus in a better position to understand why and how various critiques formulated by early ecologists have been turned into processes of deeper regulation through on-going processes of assimilation into modern governmentalization.

Despite the helpfulness of green governmentality studies in exposing how Nature is becoming instrumental in the deepening of modern governmentality, this dissertation has chosen to

focus on the ontological assumptions deployed by green governmentality studies to articulate their critique, in particular the genealogical method and the historical ontology inherited from Michel Foucault. Although Foucaultian scholars have certainly contributed to the resurrection of the question of ontology, we have argued that governmentality studies are the inheritors of an anti-metaphysical tradition dominant since at least the Scientific Revolution. More precisely, we have suggested that this anti-metaphysical tradition, which has emerged with the gradual rise of nominalism, positivism and the rise of experimental sciences, merging with the supremacy of a historical paradigm, never could repudiate all their entanglements with various ontological commitments—at minimum their assumptions of an objective time and the existence of an objective reality (often conceived in atomistic terms). We have also suggested that by privileging epistemology over ontology, the adherents of the anti-metaphysical “epistemological turn” are basically trying to sidestep the ontological question altogether, either by assuming a realist standpoint by which an objective reality is posited as existing prior to human cognition, a Kantian semi-realist standpoint which asserts that “forms of intuition” are pre-ordering our understanding through aprioristic notions such as “space” and “time”, or, more recently, various forms of pragmatism turning ontology into a mere linguistic horizon used to facilitate communication strategies between agents to solve specific issues.

One of the problems we have identified with such an “epistemological turn” is that although it clearly rejects the metaphysical components associated with the reign of scholasticism and the *ancien régime* we often associate with it, it remains nevertheless entangled with subtle Eurocentric tendencies holding the European standards of civilization as the beacon of truth, progress and evolution. Through colonial expansions, the European powers have subjugated numerous societies by gradually forcing on them models of trading, religion and morality, politics, agriculture and forestry, education and science, urbanism and industrialization,

which, even after the so-called decolonization period following the Second-World War, still determine their life-styles and worldviews in significant ways. Colonial enterprises have often been justified through various quests to find precious resources or slaves, to save souls, to educate, and help hopeless “primitives” through subtle epistemic regimes, worldviews and systems of beliefs which are still very much in place today, regimes by which we have convinced ourselves that our knowledge is superior and that the temporary supremacy we had over “primitive societies” was unfortunate, but necessary for their own good.

In other words, we had to convince ourselves of the necessity (often motivated by conflicts between European powers) of our good intentions, and our so-called superiority in order to pursue such a Grand task. With the dissemination of Western colonial enterprises in America, India, African, Australia, and Asia came the dissemination of a specific understanding of spiritual subject-matters (monotheistic against polytheistic), a specific understanding of knowledge as “true” because evidence-based (*contra* oral cultures, myths, opinions, tradition and folklore), a specific epistemological understanding based on the supremacy of logical concepts as informing our experiences (such as the principle of identity and the principle of non-contradiction, leading to the subject/object divide), a specific understanding of Nature in need of being dominated for the betterment of the human race and exploited as a “resource” (*contra* all animist beliefs viewed as primitive superstitions), a specific understanding of morality and freedom gradually placing the individual’s rights at the center of ethics (above custom or collective restrictions deemed barbaric), a specific understanding of progress and maturity as this movement from dependency to an ever-greater independency, and a specific understanding of objective time (clock time and the imposition of the Western calendar) and history as unfolding finite and irreversible events. Although direct military or colonial

occupation has been ended in many places in the world, the cultural imprints of Western ways of life imposed through centuries of colonialism and conquests are still very much prevalent.

## 2. The Dissemination of Modern Culture

The dissemination of modern ways of life and worldviews has certainly contributed to the creation of a more homogenous world. Not only were the minds, worldviews and self-representations of many non-Westerners peoples gradually taken over, but the physicality of their experiences also were through the dissemination of new disciplinary methods, standardized technologies, urban constructions, planning and architecture, schooling and working methods, military organizations, media entertainments, hobbies and sports, clothing, fashion, art and so on. As Foucault made clear in *Discipline and Punish*, modern ways of life did not just bring new ways for non-Westerners to conceive of themselves as “subjects of rights” (in the best scenarios); they were gradually assimilated into disciplinary regimes seizing their bodies as a working force to be developed and tamed, their minds to be shaped through being physically attuned to an industrial and market life-style. Entire non-Western societal models were destroyed through the disciplinarization of their members via disseminated institutions, such as hospitals, schools, asylums, prisons, military barracks and so on. Such transformation often came at the price of the destruction of native languages, folklore, traditional knowledge, local technologies, worldviews, and so on.

Of course, it can be argued that without the dissemination of what are regarded as the fruits of Western culture (such as modern rationalism and science, human rights, constitutionalism, democracy, Rule of Law and so on), it would have been impossible for Western societies to begin to rectify certain of their mistakes, including the genocide of numerous Indigenous societies, the ecological spoliation and occupation of their land, the practice of slavery,

colonial enterprises, economic exploitation and so on. It can also be argued that the dissemination of many cultural, scientific and technological innovations emerging from Western societies is responsible for many positive impacts on non-Western populations. But this is to justify *a posteriori* some horrific abuses by formulating a premise that was not necessary: that could have been otherwise. It is like arguing that the Shoah was an unfortunate but *necessary* event for the subsequent 1948 Human Rights Declaration and the establishment of a new world order to happen. Such a line of reasoning often goes beyond historical description; it is often loaded with the Kantian belief that there is an intelligent force at play in the course of history, which, despite our conflicts and ongoing holocausts (Sudan, Tibet, Rwanda, Ex-Yugoslavia and the Armenian genocide to name just a few), would guide us toward the betterment of humanity as a whole; in sum, it offers a teleological argument justifying the unfortunate casualties of History as serving an ever greater level of civilization.

Interestingly enough, a similar argument has often been made that the modernization of the world still represents the best solution to the ecological crisis it has generated by imposing a unsustainable model of civilization based on a ideal of progress as perpetual growth, a view of Nature as an reservoir of infinite resources; and an understanding of freedom viewed through this competitive *ethos* transforming humans as mere “resources” to be squeezed for the profits they may generate. In other words, we still find the argument that the greening of the current dominant civilizational paradigms (techno-industrial and capitalist model) is the best remedy for the ecological predicaments caused by the growing industrialization and mass-marketization of the various human societies, pressured to join the now global and interconnected ever-capitalist world economy. It is often suggested that the global situation is so stretched, so explosive and infinitely complex, that any radical change in the functioning of the world economy and geopolitics could bring the entire planet to the brink of disaster,

triggering the multiplication of conflicts over the most basic natural resources, anarchy and re-emerging tyrannies and dictatorship. In an increasingly overpopulated world, only what we (the West) know best could save us from an ecological catastrophe: namely technological solutions to our ecological challenges (which mostly only the leading industrial economies can develop and afford), as well as the deepening of governmental regulations—yet in the context of a free economy—to coerce human individuals viewed as ultimately blind to anything but their own individual and immediate self-gratifications and self-preservation.

By bringing back the topic of ontology, Foucault and his followers problematize the so-called universal and unchanging “truths” about humanity, ourselves, our nature or Nature, which frame the various ways in which we understand and govern ourselves and others. Although Foucault did not engage directly with the ecological question, his critiques of the core metaphysical elements by which we articulate the “truths” by which we govern ourselves did contribute to shape an *ethos* for green governmentality scholars to articulate critiques of the ways in which Nature, Truth and governmental practices are entangled. In particular, Foucault criticized the beliefs in a transcendental subject, a teleological understanding of Nature or History, and an understanding of science or knowledge as necessarily geared toward progress. History, for Foucault, must be stripped of all beliefs in supra-historical agency, design or teleological arguments, in the same way that Darwin stripped the concept of Nature or species of these qualities. By historicizing ontology—by showing the finitude and contingency of the epistemic regimes by which we posit what reality is—Foucault has problematized not only the belief in universal and trans-historic rationalities by which states of domination are justified, but also the belief in a form of transcendental subjectivity according to which we set our normative compass across the vast span of human history. Foucault and his followers have shown the contingency of the various “regimes of truth” we hold as universal, unchanging,

and forever true. As such, they attempt to show the entanglement of our “regimes of truth” with power dynamics, as well as their effect on shaping what we hold as “true” or “false” in relation to the ways in which we modulate our behaviours and perceive ourselves.

Such a critical *ethos* has often been welcomed as a valuable addition to resist the diverse modes of domination by which the “freedom to be otherwise” is limited or jeopardized. Foucault’s treatment of ontology—including its politicization—has facilitated critical engagement with the different power\knowledge formations by which “truth” and our experience of order have been sealed into processes of subjectification that need to be challenged. According to such an *ethos*, discourses promoting the *status quo* and the superiority of the modern ways to manage our current ecological predicaments should be challenged, *but also those promoting an essentializing understanding of Nature superseding the ways in which we govern ourselves and others from an ecological standpoint (be it deep or shallow)*. In other words, no form of knowledge can claim the authority of preceding and preordaining our experience of freedom. The concepts of Civilization and Nature are certainly generating “effects of truth,” but, for genealogist scholars following Foucault’s historical ontology, these concepts are fundamentally historical and cultural constructions whose strategic use and reversibility are more important than any attempt to fix their meanings in a definitive manner. Hence, although Foucault’s treatment of ontology can be seen as critical of the supremacy of the current dominance of the epistemological turn, it remains resolutely anti-metaphysical.

Foucault’s historical ontology, ontology of praxis and metaphysics of will surely strip ontology from what is believed to be its classical metaphysical implications. Ontology is in fact not only historicized; it is politicized through the immanent notions of “practice” and

“will” making ontology an analytics; an act of interrogating, challenging, and reinventing the relations—always historically finite and contingent—by which we actualize the potential of our freedom through power dynamics and regimes of subjectification\objectification in constant transformation and difference with themselves. As such, Foucault, like Nietzsche before him, challenges what is believed to most obviously characterize classic Western metaphysics, namely a “hostility to what is transient, changing, contradictory, and upsetting of a sense of security” (Mahon 1992, p. 123).

In the previous chapter, we challenged this anti-metaphysical posturing of Foucault’s thought by arguing that the notions of finitude and contingency informing his treatment of ontology can be traced back to a series of metaphysical decisions which belong to the Christian doctrine of Creation; a doctrine which has temporalized Nature by explaining its creation as caused by a primordial act of God. In short, Foucault’s ontology remains an enterprise influenced and even framed by a very specific metaphysics. These metaphysical decisions not only favoured the emergence of the empirico-experimental paradigm (which became central to what we now call modern science) and the domination of an historical understanding of the world; they contributed to launch a historicity enframing Nature as finite and contingent (hence unknowable from the standpoint of the Greek *logos*), moving the center of truth from the naturalness of the thing-in-itself (Aristotle) to one of radical externality and unknowingness: the will of God.

We have argued that the metaphysical decisions emerging with the Christian doctrine of creation still play a significant role in the critical *ethos* found at the heart of Foucault’s governmentality studies (their nominal and historical treatment of the question of Nature in particular). We made this point salient to show that the historicity and the metaphysics of will

endorsed by Foucault's genealogical method are not the self-evident truths we often assume they are, but the outcomes of a specific understanding of the world and of ourselves, a specific ontology emerging from a singular cultural itinerary. Paradoxically, we are radicalizing—and not negating—Foucault's ontological thrust by challenging the metaphysical residues we find framing his critical *ethos*: namely, Foucault's understanding of finitude and contingency informing his historical ontology and metaphysics positing “acts of will” as creating (rather than reflecting or mirroring) what Reality is.

But here we neither wish to criticize historicism by endorsing an even more radical form of historicism; nor do we wish to sanction the anti-metaphysical posturing currently en vogue in postmodernist currents of thought. If one thing has become clear through our critique of Foucault's treatment of ontology is that avoiding all metaphysical assumptions in positing a philosophy, or even critical *ethos* (attitude), appears next to impossible. It is thus not the presence of metaphysical assumptions or commitments that troubles us in Foucault's genealogical method, or even his use of hidden universals, but the persistent Eurocentric and anthropocentric tendencies—despite Foucault's intercultural, smiling openness and the dissolution of Man as center of his *ethos*—we find at the heart of his genealogical method.

Such Eurocentric and anthropocentric tendencies are visible if we adopt the standpoint of a deeper ecological and intercultural perspective in search for a new paradigm when it comes to our relationship with Nature: a much needed paradigmatic shift, I suggest, if we not only wish to alleviate the symptoms of our current ecological predicaments associated with the industrial and mass-consumption ways of life branded by the Western world as a success story, but also the deeper causes of what emerge not only as a self-destructive, but “whole-destructive” set of behaviours and modes of consciousness. On the one hand, Foucault's Eurocentric tendencies

can be seen at work in his implicit tendency to subsume all existing cosmologies under the framework of his historical ontology, condemning not only Western transcendentalism and universalism, but all forms of transcendentalism, universalism or other modes to relate to historicity and temporality which may inform other's peoples cultures in relation to what *they* understand as Nature. On the other hand, Foucault's anthropocentrism can be noted in the passivity and secondary role his works confers on Nature as merely a conceptual construct (historical, finite and contingent), important to the sole extent that it can be found at the heart of our current power\knowledge configurations.

As *The Order of Things* makes clear, Nature only designates Mankind's successive attempts to generate a sense of order—an *episteme*—by which he can then regulate his knowledge with the authority of something standing as objective (Foucault 1966). Foucault's illustration of an *episteme* shifting from the reign of representation to the one of functionality and organism which allegedly allowed for the emergence of modern biology is a good example of this. Foucault never attempted to enlarge his problem to the seminal relationships between natural entities and humans as a multi-faceted political problem in which natural entities are proactive agents in our comprehension of Nature. Rather, his theories on power, truth, ethics and subjectivity solely focus on human activities because Foucault's main obsession—how to ensure the reign of an undetermined and futurized freedom—grants no independent status to Nature. In fact, Nature (or any so-called natural truths) is viewed explicitly or implicitly as a limit to be challenged by the adherents of a Foucaultian *ethos*; an *ethos* according to which the only rightful political and ethical *telos* to pursue ought to be freedom itself, modulated here as a compulsive *impetus* to resist any given form of subjectivity or objective reality one may encounter or adopt.

### 3. Toward a Relational Ontology

As a potential solution, we have evoked the possibility of shifting toward a relational ontology rather than an historical ontology to formulate a renewed critical approach to political ecology. Now it is true that we can certainly find a relational dimension at the core of Foucault's work, underlined by his insistence on contingency, finitude, difference, and the fundamental relational nature and changing attributes of what we perceive as Reality.

Foucault's historical ontology breaks down the dominant ways in which we formulate "truths" by which we govern ourselves and others by showing the disseminated *relations* by which our ways to assemble "truths" (as conditions of emergence) are themselves contingent, culturally and historically bounded, and never identical with themselves. But ultimately Foucault's relationality remains framed by a historical ontology acting as a dominant framework superseding all other cosmologies, this by forcing a specific way of understanding the world and ourselves in terms of radical contingency, finitude and impermanence.

Foucault's treatment of ontology is an excellent example of the ways in which even the most radical, particularizing and decentred philosophies can be articulated upon metaphysical problems *and* solutions specific to their culture, context and time. As Foucault has shown on numerous occasions, to adopt an *atemporal*, unchanging and universal conviction beyond these limits is clearly problematic. *But this remains true even if contingency and finitude are what we hold here as being implicitly universal and aprioristic.* It thus appears that we have a paradox here: whatever we may hold as ontological commitments appears to lead us to endorse universalistic and aprioristic formulations that do violence to whatever exceeds the context of their formulation; yet to even hold such a view—or to pretend that we hold no ontological commitment but adhere to a pure pragmatism—is to endorse ontological

commitments superseding all others ontologies from a universalistic and aprioristic standpoint.

The relational ontology we wish to suggest as an alternative to Foucault's treatment of ontology does not attempt to avoid all metaphysical commitment. It rather attempts to minimise the endorsement of a particular cosmological view imposing itself on others by modeling the content of our experiences in a closed, static or definitive fashion. We are seeking an ontology that could facilitate an understanding of Nature based on relationality between human beings and between human and non-human beings. We are seeking a "middle path" between radical universalism and radical particularism and the possibility to expand the relationship between ontology and politics through a paradigmatic shift of consciousness. Our challenge here is twofold. First, we wish to formulate a politicized approach to ontology that does not posit a particular vision of Nature over all others, but recognizes *both* (A) the value of the diversity of views we find about Nature *and* (B) the possibility of the relatedness of our experiences on some kind of shared grounds. Second, we seek an alternative that does not simply negate the ontological existence of Nature or elevate it above our experience of freedom and transformation. We rather seek an alternative that can facilitate a shift in consciousness regarding the status of non-human beings that would help us to understand that they are not mere objects or resources at our sole disposition, but living-partners entitled (as we are) to a maximization of their well-being in the context of larger ecological settings supported by homeostasis and balancing relationships. In sum, we wish to articulate a political ontology that encourages a paradigm shift through which we may begin to understand that "undetermined freedom" and perpetual resistance is not the *summum bonum* for beings whose existence is interwoven with—and thus depends on—the existence of a myriad of natural beings to whom we need to be awakened in a profound way.

Our formulation of relational ontology is influenced by the work of many authors, including Arne Naess (whose thesis has been explored in the first chapter), Harold H. Oliver, Robin Durie and Freya Matthews. The concept of relational ontology (or relational ontologies) can be understood as the formulation of a univocal ontology whose principle is to begin from relation as such, from which the sense of entities as emerging from these relations is then derived (Durie 2002, p. 162). Here the idea of multiplicity is, in itself, affirmed as *both* One and Many by Durie; and “since neither the being nor the nature of the elements of multiplicity are determined by a principle transcending multiplicity,” there is no need to account for the means by which One and Many interrelate beyond that multiplicity, that is relationality. To put it otherwise, it is *as* difference-in-itself that substance is here *causa sui* (Durie 2002, pp. 169-172).

#### 4. Relationality and the Notion of “Pure Experience”

For Harold H. Oliver, the concept of relational ontology is associated with the notion of “pure experience.” Critical of what he describes as an overt identification of experience with thinking, Oliver suggests a shift toward an identification of experience with “pure experience” (Oliver 1984, p. 35). “Pure” here means “prior to reflection;” since, for Oliver, the latter would generate a spatial disconnection between the known and the knower, and a temporal disjunction between the intent and the act. For Oliver, the combination of such spatial and temporal disjunctions accounts for the emergence of a subject/object paradigm we find at the heart of Western cultures (Oliver 1984, p. 96). The root of such a paradigm is here associated with the structures of the Western languages, which, for Oliver, embody “a subject-predicated structure with the predication primarily announcing temporality” (Oliver 1984, p. 86). These

structures have made it quite inevitable, Oliver argues, that the peoples “who speak these languages should assign fundamentality to subjects, objects and time” (Oliver 1984, p. 86). In other words, Oliver is suggesting that the ways in which we conceive subjects and objects as invariant, and their relationships as infinitely variable, are the result of our particular ways of speaking about the world and our experiences (Oliver 1984, p. 159). This is, of course, not to suggest that we are necessarily prisoner of the structures of our languages. Considering the open-ended, relational and dynamic structures of languages, it is always possible to untangle ourselves from the ontological assumptions embedded in what was sedimented in our languages. But to do so requires special attention to or awareness of the ways in which ontological assumptions unknown to us are carried in the ways we speak about reality or Nature .

For Oliver, Newtonian physics (or cosmology) has consecrated ontologically what our languages have been inducing linguistically by making Time and Space absolute.<sup>109</sup>

Newtonian cosmology would in fact be responsible for the modulation of the subject\object paradigm through what Freya Mathews describes as the rise of Mechanistic Materialism (Mathews, 1991). In other words, it appears that the assignment of fundamentality to objects, subjects and time has been modulated through a *specific* understanding of substance (“substance pluralism”), which defines the world as essentially made up of impenetrable and finite particle-matters. The motion of these particles is explained through a causality principle, which is commonly interpreted as operating *mechanically* through actions of pushing and pulling necessitating some form of contact between objects and the participation of primordial forces. These particles of matter would also move in the framework of an absolute *Time*, which unfolds linearly and steadily, irrespective of any local motions or forms of

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<sup>109</sup> Absolute Time, for Newton, “passes equably without relation to anything external, and thus without reference to any change or way of measuring of time[...] Absolute time, and mathematical space remain similar and immovable without relation to anything external” (Rynasiewicz 2004)..

measurement. In other words, Time and Space are metaphysically posited as ontological containers, which, in turn, allow the conception of objects\subjects as these discrete and finite entities we can apprehend not only empirically, but also mathematically by matching their atomistic configuration to the numeral entries of our quantitative methods, thus harmonizing the physical reality of a world now perceived through the lens of a Mechanistic materialism with the predictive power of mathematics.

With the emergence of Mechanistic Materialism, new theories of physics gradually replaced the Medieval and Renaissance explanations for motion, which relied on notions such as “souls,” “Nature” or “action at distance” such as affects (Mathews 1991, pp. 16-17). Motion was now explained either through philosophical theories which lumped together the notions of space and quantity (Descartes’ *Res extensa*) or through the formulations of Newtonian cosmology which assumed the existence of a certain void allowing movement of the particles. Following the reductionism of mechanistic philosophy, the whole of the Universe was now explained in terms of the behaviours of its separate parts (Mathews 1991, p. 17). As we have explained in earlier chapters, no longer was the world conceived as an organism animated by a teleological purpose; no longer were objects explained in term of intrinsic qualities; no longer was the world seen as hierarchically divided between finite realms (e.g. Aristotle’s sublunary and supralunary). Rather the world was now described as composed of dead-like, irreducible, and value-neutral particles, aggregated to form a world functioning as a clock, essentially indifferent to its own fate; a world ruled by kinetic principles according to which any transfer of energy requires direct contact between its parts; a unified world ruled by the same universal and homogenizing laws governing the Earth’s moon or the Jupiter’s moons revealed by Galileo’s telescope.

## 5. The Cultural Assimilation of Newtonianism

As we have previously argued, the emergence of Mechanistic Materialism had significant impacts not only on our conceptions of physics, but also on some of our most deep-seated political, social, ethical and ecological assumptions. What Freya Mathew describes as the “Newtonian cosmology” was built on metaphysical assumptions carrying significant implications for our ways of understanding Nature, ourselves, and our relations to others. Meaningful connections can indeed be observed between the adoption of a particular worldview and the ways in which we govern ourselves and others—thus between the sphere of cosmology and politics. Freya Mathews discusses in great detail these connections in relation to what she describes as “the cultural assimilation of Newtonian atomism” and its ideological implications. She shows that Mechanistic atomism has been endorsed by most influential modern thinkers, from Kepler to Galileo, Descartes to Newton, Hobbes to Locke. Although significant differences can be found between these thinkers, Mathews shows that most of them are in fact endorsing an atomistic understanding of matter, inherited from the work of Democritus and Lucretius, famously re-popularised by Gassendi.<sup>110</sup> Despite occasional references to other principles to explain the organization of matter and motion<sup>111</sup>, Mathews shows that these principles were for the most part dependent on the ontological premises provided by Mechanistic atomism.

Now, we know that some forms of Mechanistic atomism are well-known for their dualism, opposing mind and matter as two independent substances. While tastes, odours and colors are regarded as the domains of the mind (conceived in a subjective light) by someone like

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<sup>110</sup> Freya Mathews discusses, for instance, the difference between the understanding of the universe in terms in plenum and vortex of Descartes (in which matter is lumped with extension) and a world which is described as framed by absolute Time and Space and an understanding of matter as mass by Newton (Mathews 1991, pp. 18-19).

<sup>111</sup> For example, we can think of Descartes’ vortice (everything moves in spiral or “tourbillons” bringing the heaviest object to the center) or Newton’s gravitational force.

Galileo, the body is seen as an amalgam of discrete parts operating as a machine. Breaking down matter into discrete parts provides the enormous advantage of facilitating the formulations of mathematical equations, which rely on a similar set of abstractions formulated in an atomistic fashion: numbers. In other words, the concept of a discrete and impenetrable particle allows matter to become calculable, penetrable to the abstractions of the mathematical mind. The realm of matter and bodies soon became the exclusive realm of a verificationism and objectivism through a mathematical approach to motion, leaving behind the teleological explanations of motion we find in Aristotle's physics. No teleology and no hierarchical divisions were to organize matter and motion any longer; only external and calculable forces obeying to impersonal "laws" are now to frame atoms (or particles), conceived as having fundamentally no intrinsic motion or self-starter principle. Dissociated from the realm of the mind and the mysterious process of "Life," the realm of matter is now seen as fundamentally inert, passive, homogenous and "dead" (Mathews 1991, p. 17).

The reductivism of Mechanistic materialism has been famously elevated to the status of a method of investigation by Descartes, according to which the Whole could be explained only in terms of the behaviours of its separate parts (Mathews 1991, p. 17). To do so, Descartes associated matter with extension in a way that could facilitate the adoption of a thoroughly mathematical apprehension of space and bodies. Simultaneously, Descartes associated the mind (as an independent "thinking substance") with the individual experience of consciousness (mostly the experience of intention), reduced here to an "atomistic abstraction": the subject (*Res cogitans*) versus the world of bodies and space (*Res extensa*). It is however with the Newtonian consecration of the atomistic concept of "mass" as integral to matter, that space was finally distinguished from matter from an objectivist (rather than subjectivist) and individualizing standpoint. In other words, it is with the rise Newtonian cosmology that matter

was not only geometrized, but atomized (individualized) to a new degree through the attribution of length, height, depth *and mass* within the framework of an *empty* space defined here as “pure extension”—a notion of *empty space* counterintuitive and non-logical for many contemporaries of Newton for whom emptiness could not be predicated to anything that actually exists.

Despite opposition and adversity, Newtonian atomism rapidly became the dominant blueprint for an objectivist way of conceiving the world mediated by the individualization of matter through a concept of mass (rather than mere extension), granting a new degree of physicality and experimental verifiability to the individualization of substance. Gradually, “the cultural assimilation of Newtonianism” spread to all subjects pertaining to “common sense” (Mathews 1991, pp. 20-22). Newtonianism was part of a larger cultural revolution in Western societies against what has been described by Colin E. Gunton as the supremacy of monistic tendencies associated with the supremacy of pre-modern theology and metaphysical systems such as neo-Platonism, which would have encouraged simultaneously a conception of unity that suppresses human particularity and freedom, and a social hierarchization of society according to natural predispositions (Gunton 1993, p. 213). The particularism which Newtonianism endowed to matter provided the cosmological framework to imagine individuals as these irreducible “social atoms” whose integrity ought to be protected (i.e. their natural inclinations).

It would however be wrong to strictly reject Newtonianism or the uprising of a Scientific Revolution and Christian theology. It remains an interesting fact that the penetration of Newtonian cosmology was indeed facilitated by propaganda orchestrated by the Church of England and an interest group called the Latitudinarians (which included Richard Bentley,

Samuel Clarke and John Harris). The goal of such propaganda was to shape a broad ideological platform (a “Natural Religion”) that all “men” of reason could agree to, despite their different sectarian affiliations. That being said, the dissemination of Newtonianism extended far beyond the English scene through different translations and overviews of Newton’s work in vernacular across Europe (French, Italian, Portuguese, German, Italian, and even Newtonianism for Ladies). One of the political goals of such dissemination was to halt the radicalization of the Newtonian paradigm by Atheistic thinkers like Thomas Hobbes, who endorsed a particularly crude version of Materialistic atomism asserting that everything that exists must have a body or no existence at all (Mathews 1991, p. 21).

Against Atheism, but also against what was regarded as the danger of despotic government, the Latitudinarians defended the notion of a *providential* God, the importance of Christian dogmas, but also the ascent of the English bourgeoisie and their business interests in need of greater freedom and political privileges.<sup>112</sup> To do so, the Latitudinarians advanced the idea that what was true for the material order of the world was also true for the social order. They defended the idea that not only had God delegated his creative power to organize what was conceived as passive nature through industry, industrialization and the domination of Nature. They also suggested that we inherited the power to shape societies in accordance with the Natural order. This natural order was based on the mechanistic and atomistic Newtonian model according to which individuals—just like atoms (singular, irreducible, homogenized [hence fundamentally equal])—provided the ontological bedrock of our societal tissue, a society in need of no teleological principles to guide it, except the notion of a “spontaneous order” assured by the maximization of the individual freedom to strive for their self-preservation. For the Latitudinarians, only the maximization of individual freedom to trade,

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<sup>112</sup> For a discussion on the religious agenda of the Boyle lectures mixing Newtonianism and theology, see chapter 7 of Alexandre Koyré (1968). *From the closed world to the infinite universe*. Johns Hopkins paperback ed. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.

buy, innovate, develop and compete—against the tyranny of abusive government and hierarchical societies maintained by unjust privileges and blind faith in traditions and superstitions—could guarantee the providential harmonization of Nature and human societies according to God’s plan. Gradually, the fate of Newtonianism and liberalism (as a political and economic doctrine) merged together to form a cosmological and metaphysical framework at the centre of modern science, individualism, free trade, and the rising republican and democratic ideals.

Unfortunately for the Latitudinarians, although the hypothesis of God as Prime Mover and Soul\Life-Provider may appear essential to support the Newtonian account of materialistic atomism, the introduction of God as a Prime Mover remains at best only a contingent proposition from a logical standpoint, and this for at least two reasons. As Mathews puts it, because motion itself is a *contingent* principle in the Newtonian cosmology, the entire aggregation of atoms forming the universe could perfectly exist while being perfectly still. In short, motion and the source of motion are not ontologically *necessary* for the existence of the Newtonian universe (Mathews 1991, p.31). Second, there are no *necessary* reasons why a hypothetical First Cause of motion should be attributed to God. The First Cause could perfectly be of physical origin (*e.g.* the Big Bang theory) despite the problem of infinite regress associated with finding the cause of this First Material Cause *ad infinitum*. Moreover, even if a transcendental cause could be identified as such, there is *no necessity* to identify this transcendental cause with God as depicted by Judeo-Christian mythologies (Mathews 1991, p. 31).

These loose ends between Newtonianism and natural theology were rapidly exploited by thinkers inspired by the intellectual legacy of Thomas Hobbes, who focused on what he

described as the egoistic tendency of all individuals viewed as “social atoms” to strive for their self-preservation in such a way that, without the artificial proclamation of Leviathan (an absolute, unique and despotic political authority superseding all others), our natural condition is not “spontaneous order,” but a state of generalized and anarchical war. The Hobbesian state of Nature is predicated on the ontological and irreducible existence of individuals, which, like atoms, are declared equal and of a similar nature when it comes to (A) their desire to live (understood as individual self-preservation), (B) their power to do violence (their capacity to kill one another), (C) and their access to wisdom (which is allegedly derived from experience which everybody has) (Mathews 1991, p. 26). Following such a radicalization of the Newtonian paradigm, Nature became less a model to imitate than a dangerous state that must be yielded to the political *will* of an Absolute Sovereign without which the existence of social order, industry, commerce, and civilization are believed to be impossible. Echoing Descartes’ and Bacon’s appeal to subjugate Nature, it follows that the specificity of what makes us human is dissociated from the realm of Nature, which is reduced to the status of a passive resource ultimately indifferent to its well-being, and rationally inexplicable as a whole because of the randomness that presides over the origin of its patterns (viewed here as deprived of any grand teleology, agency or intrinsic value).

Despite the Latitudinarians’ best efforts, they could not stop the rise of “subjectivist approaches” to ethics derived from a radicalization of Mechanistic materialism, rerouting the notion of spontaneous freedom toward this idea that all motivations can be reduced to an interest in self-preservation no objective standpoint can evaluate beforehand. Hobbes certainly admits the notion of a “spontaneous freedom” in the state of Nature, but here this irrational and dangerous freedom—which allegedly every atomistic individual possesses—must precisely be subjugated to an artificial and manmade supreme authority if a political society

and civilization is to be possible. Hobbes thus depicts a world in which our values are derived less from a contact with Nature than against it. Nature is depicted not only as indifferent to its own destruction (or ours for that matter), but as a dangerous and uncontrollable state of affairs. From a normative standpoint, nothing is to be derived from an inert Nature fundamentally made of particles dominated by contingency and chaos. Nature is only evoked as the *verso* of human civilization, as a disintegrating cocoon to be left behind or to be devoured after we reach the artificial and self-proclaimed stage of civility. Once the *concept* of Nature has served its purpose to explain the chaotic *verso* of human civilization, Nature is thus quickly emptied of any meaning that would stand on its own. Emptied of anything that could threaten our politicized freedom, Nature is discarded as a naïve construct of our mind: a mind now paradoxically confined to its own constructs determined by the randomness of a physicality it can never fully access. Of course, it can be argued that we can always observe regularities in Nature and deduce universal laws of physics, but from the fact\value distinction endorsed by the Mechanistic materialism, it can be equally argued that there is nothing inherently moral or prescriptive in these laws, echoing with a striking resemblance some of the core assumptions found in Foucault's critical *ethos*.

According to Freya Mathews, it is as such that Newtonian cosmology provided an atomist metaphysics which generated a profound hollowness when it came to the values upon which our lives are founded (Mathews 1991, p.38). The Newtonian cosmology and the dualism it fosters (mind\matter, fact\value) contributed to the belief that values, contrary to material facts, cannot be assessed objectively. It is as such that Mechanistic materialism has encouraged the emergence of relativist, materialist and irrational strands of thought, holding that values and minds are conditioned by external and more fundamental causes (material and social), "or even invented to suit the purpose of the individual" (Mathews 1991, p. 37).

Isolating *objective* facts from their *subjective* valuation, the notion of an indifferent universe alien to our spiritual aspirations has contributed to a sentiment of alienation toward both our own experiences and Nature. The “disenchantment of Nature” through dualistic assumptions derived from Mechanistic materialism has led our societies to endorse devastating anthropocentric and Eurocentric tendencies when it comes to the exploitation of non-human beings (reduced here to mere resources at our disposition), and the annihilation of non-Western cultures and cosmologies viewed as pre-scientific and/or mythical. Despite numerous innovations in physics, social sciences and philosophy, many core assumptions derived from the rise of Mechanistic materialism (values/facts distinction, atomistic substantivism, mind/body dualism, and the constitution of a science ultimately free from metaphysical assumptions) can still be seen as central to many of our ways of understanding ourselves, others and Nature.

As we have illustrated in previous chapters, both the absolutization of Time and Space and the atomisation of particle-matter by Newtonianism are the products of metaphysical decisions, and not the product of pure objective or empirical assessments. As we have argued, part of these metaphysical decisions which led us to imagine Nature as contingent, finite and impermanent, have been made possible through a cosmological shift following the emergence and supremacy of a religious-based cosmological doctrine: the Christian doctrine of Creation. It is true that this religious doctrine is now perceived as only a contingent story among many who deal with our so-called “metaphysical questions” (God, Freedom, the soul and the meaning of life). These metaphysical questions are often left to religious estimates by adherents of modern science, who capitalize on the dichotomy between fact and value to argue for the autonomy and objectivity of their scientific methods. Yet, I suggest that the cosmological belief in an external agent which *created* Nature out of a contingent “act of will”

fundamentally inaccessible to human rationality can be seen as carrying both the seeds of modern scientism and post-modern irrationalism, in part caused by the implications of adopting a creationist cosmology, which insists on divorcing Nature from the source of all perfection, on limiting the power of human rationality and demoting the Greek Logos. Once the death of God has been pronounced and the will of Man established at its place, such a cosmology has basically paved the way to the modern conception of human life in terms of rudeness individual competition of unrelated and arbitrary wills (Gunton 1993, p. 123).

#### 6. Foucault and the Object\Subject Paradigm

I wish to suggest that a similar parallel can be traced between the influence of Newtonian cosmology and the formulation of Foucault's critical *ethos*. More precisely, I argue that Foucault bears the influence of both the temporal and spatial disjunctions which Oliver attributes to the subject\object paradigm *and* its Newtonian modulation through Mechanistic materialism, especially the absolutization of Time as an ontological framework we witness with Newtonianism. It can of course be argued that Foucault adopts a dynamic and relational ontology in which no fixed subject subsists. It is true that Foucault went to great lengths to de-fundamentalize ontological categories such as the subject, the transcendental principle of rationality and the teleological understanding of history, replacing them by dynamic principles, namely an emphasis on practices, will and temporality. Ontologically speaking, it appears that everything belongs in a cultural and historical context for Foucault, and consequently cannot pretend to timeless validity. Foucault's treatment of ontology would thus stand in opposition to some of the core ontological assumptions attributed to the Newtonian atomistic and mechanistic cosmology. I nevertheless maintain that the ontological commitment seen in the work of Michel Foucault bears the influence of the object\subject paradigm described by Oliver, if we agree that at the center of Foucault's treatment of

ontology is a “metaphysics of will” assuming a fundamental disjunction between intentionality and act (which brings the ego as locus of freedom), and a spatialization of temporality between past, present and future, whose engulfing qualities are then absolutized as transcendental (finitude and contingency).

As I have previously shown, the work of Michel Foucault is in fact thoroughly influenced by some of the dominant cultural tendencies attributed to the culture of modernity, including his nominalism, irrationalism (the belief that absolute truth is out of reach to human rationality), and his historicism. Foucault is no stranger to modernity when he attributes a subjectivist, cultural and biased status to values or norms, contrasted against the positivistic backdrop of immanent practices whose contingent status predominantly dictates what we perceive as Reality. Nor is Foucault necessarily an enemy of liberal governmentality when he asserts that freedom is ultimately its own finality (Tully 1999, p. 138). Inheriting a conception of “spontaneous order” emerging through the maximization of freedom of individuals plunged in a constant process of remaking themselves anew in order to escape despotic attempts to frame their freedom, Foucault is in fact working *within* the ideological framework of liberalism through his emphasis on freedom as human finality, *and* the cosmological parameters born out of Newtonianism and Kantianism—of course changed from its hard atomistic substantivism through an acknowledgement of various dynamic processes forming an undetermined and open notion of substance or identity; but a dynamism still held ontologically together by an absolute and exterior historicity posited as real and overarching by its effects (finitude and contingency), but, similar to Newton’s account of absolute Time and Space, empirically ungraspable. Hence, despite its dynamism and relationalism, our contention is that Foucault’s response to the problem of advanced forms of liberal governmentality (which consists in defending the possibility of spontaneous, agonistic and irreducible “practices of freedom”

paradoxically in need of governmental rationalities immanent to all power formations to manifest themselves) still relies on ontological assumptions bearing absolutizing tendencies. To put it otherwise, Foucault's dynamism and relationality are still not relational enough. Foucault's relationalism and dynamism still cling to absolute ontological categories. And these categories, as we have argued previously, are problematic both from an intercultural and ecological standpoint.

### 7. Post-Newtonian Cosmologies and Relationality

Before turning to what constitutes the beginning of a solution to such contention, a clarification must be addressed regarding what can be seen as a hasty rapprochement between tenets of early modern philosophy and the work of Michel Foucault; a rapprochement which can be accused of ignoring the post-Newtonian evolution of contemporary physics, as well as the various trends in current philosophy which are not necessarily reducible to Kantianism and Cartesianism. To be sure, both the domain of contemporary physics and Western philosophy went through a series of transformations away from classical Newtonian science and early modern philosophy. The argument can indeed be made that no real physicists now adhere to Newtonianism, and that many contemporary philosophers are now very critical of Kantianism or Cartesianism (including Michel Foucault himself).

After all, it is now more than a hundred years since Einstein wrote his famous papers on the relativity of time and space, and most people would say that, since then, the dominant scientific conceptions have been Einsteinian, not Newtonian. In his theory of special relativity, Einstein following Mach, abolished Newtonian absolute space and time.<sup>113</sup> As Freya Mathew summarizes it:

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<sup>113</sup>As Freya Mathews explains it : “the spatial interval (distance) and temporal interval (time lapse) between two events, e1 and e2, is not fixed: it varies according to the reference frame in which it is measured. If A is an

“Newton had supposed that absolute space constitutes the true rest frame relative to which the absolute velocities of all observers could be determined. Einstein’s innovation was to deny that such absolute frame was identifiable: the state of motion of any given observer could be specified only relative to that of another. Motion—or inertial motion at any rate—was thereby irremediably relativized ” (1991, p. 62)

As such, Cosmological speculations about the “big bang” or the principle of ontological autonomy may be influenced by Christian, and even by Newtonian ideas, but they would depend much more fundamentally on ideas about “internal relations” between space and time, matter and energy. That's where ideas like string theory come from, ideas that are meant to explain relations between the four fundamental forces of the universe (gravitational, electromagnetic, weak and strong nuclear forces), to give an account of the apparent unidirectionality of time, to deal with the possibility of multiple worlds, and so on. “Atomism” and “Mechanism” play little part in contemporary physics, which has to deal with problems like the curvature of space, particle/wave duality, indeterminacy of position, and so on.

It thus appears that current works in physics and cosmology are now embracing a systemic (rather than atomistic) understanding of the cosmos advocating the ontological primacy and fundamentality of dynamic systems over “atoms,” perceived in Newtonianism as discrete and inert chunks of matter interacting independently via some external forces or source of agency. It appears that now post-Einsteinian works in cosmology (derived from the General Theory of Relativity) converge toward a more monistic and dynamic (rather than pluralistic and fundamentally static) understanding of the universe unfolding in terms of curvatures that would change with time (thus challenging classic Euclidian geometry); a universe in which the ontological notion of individuation would result from “internal relations” progressing through wave-like particles out of the regional contractions of space-time, akin to ripples in a

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observer in uniform motion relative to observer B, and each measures the distance between e1 and e2, their measurement will not agree, unless they correct for the difference in their respective states of motion” (1991, pp. 61-62).

continuous fluid of energy (such as water).<sup>114</sup> And if this was not enough to convince us of the outdated character of Newtonianism, it has been suggested from a Quantum perspective that matter is not only inherently active (rather than fundamentally inert), but that our instruments of measurement or analysis would themselves affect the matter we observe, making non-localizable the condition of ontological independence in term of units of discrete substance at a subatomic level (the notion of substance in the classical sense is thus eliminated from ontology following Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle).

In other words, post-Einsteinian work in cosmology (identified as geometrodynamics by Mathews) would present us not only with a monist view of the universe; but, according to the “non-linearity of its field equations, the intertransformability of its variables, the non-locality of its entities and the feedback nature of its laws,” also a holistic one (Mathews 1991, p. 69). Many other examples could be raised to show that the Atomistic paradigm has been supplanted by what we can call a “systemic paradigm,” which takes relations seriously from a holistic and dynamic perspective. It can be argued, for instance, that the developments of social sciences or contemporary economics, especially through the development of statistical methods or the notion of market, are now sciences of relations. It can be argued that many great modern thinkers, including Hegel, Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Mauss were all attempting to think their problem more holistically, and to analyze “internal relations” accordingly. Other so called postmodern thinkers (Deleuze, Derrida, Lyotard) also attempted to move beyond the dualistic, rationalistic, dialectical or logocentric ontological tendencies often associated with modern thinkers such as Descartes, Kant, Hegel or Marx. In fact, even the very concept of modern ecology—which has had great influence on the natural and social sciences—appears

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<sup>114</sup>In fact, according to the Special Relativity Theory, even the Newtonian conception of gravitation as an instantaneous action-at-distance would be refuted by the discovery that the “effects on a particle of a gravitational field are locally indistinguishable from the effect of acceleration on the particle in question: gravitational forces and inertial forces due to acceleration are locally equivalent” (Mathew 1991, p. 63).

to be of a holistic, dynamic and relational nature. Hence the question: if people understand Nature ecologically, are they not already adopting a relational ontology?

We cannot properly answer in the scope of this chapter all the problems and the particularity of each and every one of the thinkers mentioned above in relation to their ontological and cosmological commitments, especially when it comes to relationality. We are here trying to problematize the thought of Michel Foucault in relation to its ontological commitments and its treatment of Nature. It should however be briefly mentioned that despite an ecological turn in our predominant ways of understanding of Nature, our first chapter has clearly demonstrated that the inputs of an ecological understanding of Nature can in fact be modulated by all sorts of ontological and political presuppositions. In that regard, equating an ecological understanding of Nature with relational ontology would negate the political aspects we confer on the adoption of a relational ontology rather than an historical ontology to think of Nature. As it will become clearer, I am here advocating that there is a substantive difference between a methodology which takes relations as its focus of analysis to retroactively better understand discrete objects, agents, systems or organisms—which are mostly presupposed to exist independently before they can relate—and the adoption of the principle of relationality as a core ontological assumption to formulate a metaphysics which moves us beyond this first ontological association of substance and autonomy (or self-containment). Ontologically speaking, our access to a common reality would depend on the unfolding of infinite relations which always and already presuppose the blossoming of differences, differences which are not perceived as irreducible from an autonomous or atomistic standpoint, but rather as irreducible because of the relations through which they emerge and are connected.

It should also be mentioned that despite the Einsteinian shift, not only the value\fact dichotomy and the general methodology of scientific enquiries (predominantly based on an inductive and empirical *episteme*) have been kept mostly intact in contemporary physics—at the very least as informing ultimately our scientific method of validation—but that contemporary comprehensions of the universe (or cosmology) are still overtly predicated upon a pre-informing and absolutizing ontological concept. In its latest manifestation, such a concept resides with the Minkowski's notion of spacetime, which does not so much add a relational inflection between Time and Space (we would thus have to assume them as existing separately), but rather bundle them together as an actual, concrete and unified substance—which, in our opinion, basically subsumes Newtonian Time under physicality and extensive nature of Space\Matter.<sup>115</sup> In that regard, the principle of relationality is still framed by an ontological overarching notion that precedes the unfolding of relationality itself. In other words, our ontological conceptions of the universe still precede our experience of it at a fundamental level.

Of course, with the Einsteinian shift in physics, relations are no longer understood as merely exterior, contingent and of a secondary nature to pre-existing and independent chunks of matters (or atoms), but they remain subsumed under some systematic and overarching principles posited as responsible for the predictive outcomes of these internal and dynamic relations. Hence the tendencies of contemporary explorations in cosmology to fall back on some monistic explanation of the universe, in which relations are described as being internal and subsumed to a series of notions describing a reality as being fundamentally one. Both substantivist pluralism and monism in fact share a similar pattern (or blueprint) when it comes

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<sup>115</sup> On the absoluteness of Minkowski spacetime: “[...] although absolute space and absolute time are abolished within SR [Special Relativity], they are replaced by a new entity, absolute Minkowski spacetime: between two events, the space-time interval, which is a simple mathematical function of the spatial and temporal intervals, is invariant, which is to say, it is not frame relative (Mathew 1991, p. 62).

to their fundamental understanding of Reality: both pluralism and monism are predicated upon an understanding of substance or system as self-contained (either many or One), according to which the principle of relationality is either delineated as external and contingent (pluralism or atomism), or internal and necessary (monism or Minkowski Space-time).<sup>116</sup>

Now the same critique can be applied to the work of the influential thinkers we have mentioned earlier, which either explored the meanings of relations by assuming a pluralist or monistic ontological setting to begin with—or by framing the explanation of relations by another overarching organizing principle *of a relational nature* such as fluctuations of intensity (Deleuze) or immanent ruled games of difference without any transcendental outside (Derrida).

As a result, relationality is either explained as contingent by virtue of the existence of irreducible units of matters aggregating together under the action of some primordial forces, or as the ripple effects of the interactions of some overarching, holistic and interdependent forces. In other words, relationality is rarely accounted as an ontological principle in its own right; that is, as an ontological account that radically moves us beyond both the framework of pluralism and monism and the understanding of substance as self-contained they both assume: that is, an ontological account that moves us beyond the irrevocable paradox we are experiencing between the One and the Many, between the singular and the universal, or between the notion of substance and temporality as ontological framework.

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<sup>116</sup> It can of course be argued from an ecological standpoint that “open systems” such as living organisms are never fully self-contained in the sense that they are perpetually exchanging materials (hence relating) with their environment. But then again, both the eco-system and the living organism which depends on it must conserve some core self-contained attributes by which it can regenerate itself and maintain its development features through a degree of consistency, until the moment of death where the organism is dispersed in different environmental materials for other organisms to be exchanged. In this optic, even the dynamic process of life can be seen as a “closed system” loop-feeding on death in order to circulate back energy in the process of exchange and consumption.

It is here that Oliver's concept of relational ontology and his problematization of the object\subject paradigm can be useful. For Oliver, the temporal notions of "prior" and "posterior," and the spatial notions of "here" and "there," all designate *derivative* features of what he calls "pure experience." "Pure experience" is an ontological state in which only relations are deemed as fundamental. In other words, categories or states such as Time and Space are not ontologically fundamental for Oliver; only relations are (Oliver 1984, p. 70). "Pure experience" can thus be associated with notions such as pure Relationality and Immediacy. Of course, describing notions such as "Pure experience," Pure "immediacy" and "Relationality" doesn't come easy. After all, Oliver himself is using the temporally loaded notion of *prior* to describe "Pure experience" (as *prior* to reflection). It is here that Oliver's argument about the structures of our language takes all its importance. For what may appear as a contradiction can be justified as a residue left by the necessity of using a Western language bounded by its intrinsic characteristics to announce temporality to describe a pre-reflective state of ontology. As Oliver puts it, the dual aspects of the action emerge (either subjectival or objectival) "*not because they exist prior to the reflection, but because reflection imposes the structure of thinking consciousness (that is cogito and cogitatum) upon experience*" (Oliver 1984, p. 160).

From an ontological standpoint, we can see that temporality becomes quite a secondary issue for Oliver. Here temporality is not framing our experience of Reality as does Newton's absolutization of Time and Space, Minkowski's notion of spacetime or Foucault's historical ontology does. In relational ontology (as described by Oliver), there is no *experiencer* prior to experience or experience prior to *experiencer*: there is only *experiencing* in the most radical and immanent way we can possibly conceive. This means that there is no *experiencer* independent from the experienced. There is only experiencing which is fundamentally

constituted of relations Oliver classifies in three main categories: *simple* (as ontologically irreducible), *composites* of (some) relations (as accounting from the discreteness of the units of experience the concept of “relation” necessarily imply), and the *totality* of relations (as a speculative yet immanent paradigm for the Absolute, e.g. Spinoza’s conception of Nature). In Oliver’s account of relational ontology, there is no spatial or temporal separation between intention and act, or between knower and known at a fundamental level (Oliver 1984, p. 36). When the immediacy of experiencing is lost to a spatial disjunction between subject and object, Oliver explains, then the object becomes mediated with the subject (as the most primordial center of experience), and the Western experience of Ego emerges. When immediacy is lost to a temporal disjunction between intent and act, then the experience of succession is reversed to a succession of experiences and will is temporalized *as prior* to act in ways that it becomes distinguishable from it. This would explain why temporality is experienced as ontologically *prior* and *dissociated* from the finite and contingent experiences against which we are asserting the existence of our freewill and intentionality.

Oliver refers to the history of Western philosophy to exemplify the subject/object paradigm he attempts to criticize. The paradigm is here associated with what he describes as the supremacy of the Descartes/Kant axis. Oliver points toward Descartes and Kant as being responsible for formulating the most influential philosophical expressions of the subject/object paradigm we would find at the heart of modernity. Such a paradigm would also be responsible for the tension between the Idealist and Realist ontologies still haunting modern philosophy. On the one hand, Descartes would have ontologically reified the subject outside of which everything must be subjected to methodical doubt (*Dubito*). Such methodological doubt, as we have argued earlier, can already be seen in germ in the Christian doctrine of Creation. More precisely, by impairing the Greek logos and the access it provides to truth in absolute terms,

the Cartesian *Dubito* can be seen as the inheritor of the disconnection between Adams' descendants' inability to access Truth (as finite and created mind they cannot pretend knowing only what God knows perfectly) and Nature. With Descartes, such failure to know anything with certainty from a rational standpoint comes at the expense of the object (i.e. the world), whose ontological status (the *cogitatum*) is deemed fundamentally uncertain. Rather than accepting blind faith, Descartes' answer to such an epistemic challenge consists in going back to the subject of knowledge to ground certainty by famously suggesting that the source of doubting cannot be itself doubted as it doubts; for as it doubts, it thinks. We would thus be authorized to be certain of *being* a “thing that thinks.”

A remaining difficulty for Descartes, however, is that, although this might prove the existence of the subject as locus of certainty, it does not prove the existence of either God or the world. To prove the existence of the world and God, Descartes suggests that we must follow a rigorous method by disciplining our minds to go from what we know with certainty toward what is less certain: namely from the certainty of being a “thing (or substance) that thinks” (i.e. from the subject) toward the world and God. One of the ways in which Descartes proves both the existence of the world and God is by arguing that because we are an imperfect and finite mind, the idea of perfection and infinite cannot possibly come from our mind; hence God must exist as well as the world He has created (because God's thinking does have the power to create or to maintain itself from all eternity), thus dissipating the spectre of an evil genus which could hypothetically lead us astray all the time.<sup>117</sup>

This way of grounding our access to truth from our inward experiences (*Res cogitans*—the subject) to the outward initiates an important paradigm shift often associated with the rise of

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<sup>117</sup> On Descartes' notion of evil genus, see Descartes, R., Cottingham, J. 1996. *Meditations on first philosophy*. Rev. ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. On Descartes' notions of substance, see Descartes, R., Miller, V. Rodger. 1983. *Principles of philosophy*. Dordrecht, Holland: Reidel.

modernity. Here the locus of Truth is no longer given by Revelation or cosmological narrative (myths), but starts by a pure and rational experience of thought which takes itself as an object of investigation, as a methodological way of acquiring certainty about our existence, the world and God. Contrary to Greek deductivism, for whom our *Logos* allows universalistic and unmediated deductions about the order witnessed in the world, the Cartesian project remains deeply Christianized in that it undermines such belief by radically doubting our unmediated access to the truth of Nature (Truth is with God not Nature), while attributing to our mind the fallen qualities which the Christian doctrine of Creation attributes to it by default, namely imperfection, finitude and contingency. It is thus through an extreme—yet Christianized—form of scepticism that Descartes is led inwardly (the subject) to then reconstruct the outward (the object of God and the World). As Oliver puts it, methodical doubt leads Descartes inevitably “to the assignment of fundamentality to the *Res cogitans*” (Oliver 1984, p. 51). It is as such that Descartes laid the foundation of modern subjectivity, through what Oliver describes as a *spatial* disconnection between the “I” of the Subject (*Res cogitans*) and the “It” of the world (*Res extensa*), now posited in terms of a measurable extension compatible with the rise of Mechanistic Materialism as leading cultural and epistemic paradigm (Oliver 1984, p. 86).

On the other hand, Kant, who responded to Descartes’ universal doubt, is said to have been preoccupied by “the objectivity of the objects” (a formulation Oliver borrows from Heidegger). Kant, through the questions informing his three critiques (what can I know?/what should I do?/what can I hope?), is said to have consecrated a *temporal* disjuncture between the Intent, the “I” and the act of knowing/doing/hoping, dissociating abstractly the intent from its subject (that is through temporal reflection) (Oliver 1984, p. 50).<sup>118</sup> For Oliver, this

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<sup>118</sup> As Oliver put it: “Any modern attempt to frame fundamental assumptions can learn much from Kant’s choice of questions. The first three of his queries—‘What can I know?’ ‘What should I do?’ ‘What may I hope?’—

“temporalization of the will” would explain the dichotomizing activities associated with modern reflection and the transcendentalizing of the Good through notions such as the Kantian notion of “Categorical imperative” (which is only conceivable if the Intent and Act are dissociated in Time).<sup>119</sup> In sum, the specific ways in which we have been induced to reflect upon our experience would cause the object\subject paradigm to emerge, not the other way around; the subject\object paradigm is not the aprioristic and universal condition of possibility of our experience, as we often believe it is.

Again, as we have argued earlier, this “temporalization of the will” can be seen as already present—at least in germ—in the Christian doctrine of Creation. The will of God creating the world *ex nihilo* is indeed temporalized in the very same way than Oliver attributes to Kant. The temporal disjunction between the Intent and the Act which Oliver attributes to Kant (and more generally to the modern subject\object paradigm) would thus have deeper roots: the Christian doctrine of Creation itself. That difference aside, we can certainly agree with Oliver that Kant has contributed to galvanizing the subject/object paradigm and the problem of “knowing with certainty” to a deeper extent by making the subject the active ruler of our understanding of the world (Oliver 1984, p. 86). Although these transcendental notions can no longer be the foundations of science (limited by the realm of direct experience), they remain necessary to morality and practical reason for Kant, thus playing an important role in our

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betray already bifurcated world: the ‘I’ over and against the ‘Known’, the ‘act’, the ‘anticipated.’ It is clear that the analytic reflective process has bifurcated the reality it seeks to understand. The first question splits the unitive experience of knowing into knower-known, that is, it introduces a separation, an interval, into the pure act of knowing, with the inevitable result that the known is transfigured into a transcendent object, never really available. The second question introduces a temporal interval between intention and act—a common Western error—and so temporalizes the will. The Good becomes a transcendent object, never fully realizable. The third question splits the unitive act of anticipation into the ‘I’ and the transcendent object, ‘the future,’ the result being that the future is never really accessible on Kantian terms, as is evident from his mature work, *Das Ende aller Dinger*. The presence of the ‘separated I’ in Kant’s question betrays the function of prior assumptions which control the possible answers” (Oliver 1984, pp. 50-51).

<sup>119</sup> For the Kantian notion of the Categorical imperative, see Kant, Immanuel. 2002 *Groundwork for the metaphysics of morals*. Thomas E. Hill, Jr. and Arnulf Zweig (eds.), traduction by Arnulf Zweig, edited. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

concrete interaction with the world. We also concede the point that the Descartes/Kant axis has been very influential when it comes to the emergence of the subjectivist bias of Modern Western philosophy, and the rise of modern belief that transcendental notions such as the soul, the world and God are rationally inaccessible (again perfectly compatible with the Christian Doctrine of Creation here). We also agree with Oliver that the problem of “knowing with certainty” (which he identifies with the rise of the Modern Era) has facilitated two main ontological solutions in the context of the supremacy of the subject/object paradigm; either ontological primacy has been granted to the subject to become what we now know as the tradition of Idealism; or ontological primacy has been granted to the object in what is now accounted for as Realism (taking its roots in Medieval Nominalism for which concepts are non-physical realities), in which case the subject is often downplayed as an epiphenomenon of external and objective determinants or pragmatic considerations (Oliver 1984, pp. 87-89).<sup>120</sup>

Foucault here is a great example of the difficulty to label certain thinkers in one of those two traditions. As we have argued in previous chapters, this is because Foucault historicises simultaneously our epistemological assumptions *and* that by which we built our uncritical confidence in the *sensus communis*. Foucault reveals the contingent and finite nature of both tendencies (Realist and Idealist), as well as their origins in “acts of will” occurring in the context of various dynamics of power open to change and transformation. Foucault, however, does not fully escape the subject/object paradigm; he rather only gives this impression, I suggest, by putting one tradition against the other, this by evoking the *sensus communis* of an historical positivity endowed with finitude and contingency against our epistemological faith by which we construct the object of our universal and aprioristic certainties. Finitude and contingency are thus posited as fundamentals (at an ontological level); they become these new

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<sup>120</sup>Or to put it otherwise, idealistic metaphysics “usually proceeds from prior assumptions about the operational priority of epistemology” [...]; while “[r]ealistic metaphysics usually entails prior assumptions derived from uncritical confidence in the *sensus communis*” (Oliver 1984, p.50).

universals informing Foucault's quasi-positivistic ontology, framing in a Newtonian fashion the relations forming the tissue of our experiences, which, once again, are defined as "derivatives" of specific pre-existing qualities: here finitude and contingency (due to the necessary historical nature Foucault ascribes to them). In sum, even Foucault's attempts to evade the modern subject\object paradigm remain framed by the metaphysical tendencies associated with the paradigm it tries to undermine, namely the evocation of transcendental and aprioristic principles by which our experience of unity and diversity is pre-ordered.

As an alternative to the subject\object paradigm informing the Realist and Idealist (and we may add historical) ontologies, Oliver is proposing a relational ontology in which relations are not contained in time and space; in which neither the subject nor the object is absolutized at the expense of the other, "for both are accounted as co-aspectual features derived from experience" (Oliver 1984, p. 53). In terms borrowed from G.E. Moore, relational ontology can be described as an ontology endorsing the principle that all relations are internal, and that all *relata* are what they are only through relations: "any term which does in fact have a particular relational property, could not have existed without having that property" (Oliver 1984, 52).<sup>121</sup> In other words, relational ontology can be understood as a theory endorsing a principle of "universal internality" according to which *all* and *only* relations are fundamentals.

By suggesting that *relata* are functions of relating, Oliver's formulation of relational ontology stands on its head the ontology at the heart of Mechanistic Materialism, and perhaps even more significantly, the ontology positing that atomistically configured entities (be it atoms or *Eidos*) constitute the basic and irreducible elements of our Reality. For Oliver, the objects\subjects paradigm is the result of relations whose *ingressive* considerations would

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<sup>121</sup> See More, G.E. 1968. *Philosophical Studies*, reprint ed. Totowa NJ: Little, Adams, p. 288.

produce the notion of *subject*; while *effective* considerations would generate the notion of *object* (Oliver 1984, p. 37). Hence, from our basic geometrical representation of space predicated upon the discrete and irreducible “dot” posited by Euclid as the first axiom of classic geometry; to the way in which we conceive Time as a linear and irreversible flow of discrete and finite events (Time imagined as a string of pearls); to the atomistic configuration by which we have imagined the philosophical problem of the One and the Many; to the modern problems opposing Particularism\Universalism and Individualism\Collectivism which have shaped so many of our epistemic and political representations, the notion of relational ontology challenges many aspects of our comprehension of Reality.

To begin with, relational ontology challenges the predominant way in which we came to understand the organization of a world predicated upon the existence of entities in atomistic terms. It also challenges the way in which we have deduced freedom from we call the principle of “that-which-stands-on-its own”, a notion central to what stands as an enduring tendency of attributing superiority and primacy to what we see as “causing” while not being “caused” (i.e. ontological independence) versus what are regarded as inferior states of dependency.

Relational ontology thus challenges the hierarchical understanding of the world in which states of independency are posited as superior to states of dependency. Of course, exploring all the implications of endorsing a relational ontology is beyond the scope of this chapter. In the next and closing section, I rather concentrate on the implications of adopting a relational ontology as an alternative to what we have identified as the shortcomings of Foucault’s historical ontology. More specifically, I will explore the ways in which a relational ontology can better promote simultaneously cultural diversity and an equal standing without

encouraging reification and the thesis of incommensurability between cultures, while offering the ontological foundation for a less anthropocentric relationship between humans\|non-humans from an ecological standpoint.

As our previous chapters have shown, Foucault's genealogical approach offers a critique of our common understanding of power by illustrating the intricacies of power\|knowledge formations through which emerge various governmental rationalities by which we govern ourselves and others. Foucault's understanding of the Self—which governmental practices, technologies and rationalities attempt to subjectivise—is already conceived as a dynamic, shifting, complex and relational entity in constant transformation. Such dynamism and relationality is however mediated by Foucault not through relationality, but through (1) an historical ontology (through which the effect of a given and all-encompassing temporality is deemed ontologically fundamental); (2) an ontology of *praxis* (by which practices are deemed ontologically fundamental); (3) a metaphysics of will (by which “will” is posited as the ultimate ontological origin of our irreducible “practices of freedom”). The strengths of Foucault's approach consist in its ability to reveal the contingencies that have led to the formulation of “regimes of truth” by which we govern ourselves and others, and to open them up to critiques and transformation allowing us to become “otherwise” than prescribed.

What explains this contingent state of affairs for Foucault is twofold. First, because it is believed that we are ontologically plunged in a temporality which frames all events (and being) as finite and thus located, Foucault asserts that we can see the contingencies by which we have formulated the “truths” held in the *past* to govern ourselves and others, and thus the openness of a *present* geared toward a *future* free from any aprioristic or universal truths. Second, the ontological state of contingency, which would overrule any attempt to rationalize

our behaviours from a universal standpoint, is justified by attributing the ontological cause behind our power of transformation to “acts of will,” which, by definition, are contingent, and thus unpredictable and non-universalizable. The creative power of our will-power would guarantee a state of freedom understood here as fundamentally—that is ontologically—irreducible to any attempts to subjugate it (beyond the individual level). Freedom must here stand independently against all attempts to frame it.

The concept of Nature at the center of the current ecologization of politics has been identified by Green governmentality scholars as one of these “truths” which dangerously frame the ways in which we govern ourselves and others. Green governmentality scholars warn us against the use and misuse of Nature in pervasive power\knowledge configurations reaching all aspects of our lives through green normativity, managerialism, eco-disciplines and green ethical practices (Luke). The re-emerging cult of Nature is also seen as central to the deepening of modern governmentalization and ecological versions of biopolitics through the notion of an “endangered Nature” in need of governmentalization (Rutherford). What started as a movement of contestation is now a process by which the forces of modernization are expanded to all possible spheres of life. But in order to formulate such critiques, green governmentality scholars must (explicitly or implicitly) adopt a specific ontology when it comes to Nature understood as a contingent, finite and constructed entity. To do so, the concept of Nature is mainly described as a nominal and historical construction whose formulation is intrinsically politically motivated. Timothy Luke, for one, argues that the history of such a concept shows that Nature has received different meanings according to what different societies, in different times and locations. As such, Nature is perceived as this regulative concept *par excellence*, serving best the interests of those authorized to speak in the name of Nature—yesterday the priests of diverse religions, today the medical doctors and

researchers. Nature becomes this political technology making many of our actions understandable through the deployment of knowledge of Nature, but also to limit the scope of our actions and often serves to justify states of domination, such as the justification of slavery because certain “races” would be servile by nature (in need of being commanded), the women politically inapt because of their emotional nature, or the condemnation of homosexuality because deemed unnatural. Hence the political necessity to allow the possibility of thinking and being otherwise, especially on topics we are told are restricted to open questioning or alternatives.

One limitation attributed to this approach is that it produces a frame of mind in which all values that could potentially be raised above our freedom to be otherwise—such as the quest for ecological homeostasis and harmony—are regarded with suspicion, when not discarded outright. The genealogical method offered by the work of Michel Foucault assimilates all existential modalities in which one may understand his\her relations to Nature (namely all cosmologies and metaphysics) under an approach which consists in a commitment to nominalism, a historical ontology and a “metaphysics of the will.” As such, it frames all beings and actions as finite, contingent, merely transient and ultimately grounded in mysterious “acts of will,” which, by their contingent nature, resist all aprioristic or universal reasoning. The unfortunate consequence of adopting such approach is that all cultures are subsumed under a single ontology which, most probably against Foucault’s best intentions, frames aprioristically, and quite ethnocentrically, other people’s views of Nature.

Such a methodological approach remains culturally biased in the sense that it is the inheritor of a specific cultural itinerary that has consecrated the subject\object paradigm, first through the adoption of the Christian doctrine of Creation which is responsible not only for injecting

the notion of finitude and contingency in a Nature now *spatialized* through its radical spiritual dissociation from a kingdom of Heavens to come; but also for its *temporalization* through a “metaphysics of will” positing that the exterior and impenetrable “will of God” has created Nature, Space and Time. Foucault’s methodological approach is also the inheritor of an understanding of freedom, which, at least since the Greeks, has consistently ranked beings according to their level of “independence.” Christianized and then modernized, this normative paradigm of freedom has shaped in important respects the belief that humans possess this fundamental capacity to be undetermined (contrary to all the other natural beings deprived of freewill). In other words, we came to understand our freedom and particularity as beings-endowed-with-freewill against the backdrop of a Nature viewed as determined and incapable of progress (i.e. not free), and thus of an inferior and non-moral status. From Genesis to Descartes (and beyond), the Western mind has consistently understood itself as apart and entitled to subjugate Nature to its own superior or civilizational needs. Foucault’s critical *ethos*, as we have argued previously, is no exception here.

To be clear, being “culturally biased” is not what we reproach Foucault for here; after all who can claim to not be culturally biased when it comes to their understanding of Reality and Nature? What leads us to formulate the accusation of ethnocentrism is not the presence of cultural biases, but the tendency of Foucault’s genealogical methodology to subsume all cosmologies under the reign of an historical ontology and “metaphysic of will” which frames the fundamental relationality (“Pure experience” in Oliver’s words) and the various ways in which different peoples may relate to what we call Nature through the imposing of an overarching and homogenizing understanding of Reality. What we find problematic—not only from an intercultural but also from an ecological standpoint—is that Foucault’s genealogical approach remains committed to the anthropocentric tendency we observe in

Western culture of conceiving Nature as something passive and antagonistic to Human freedom and particularism. Foucault's critical *ethos* suffers from ethnocentrism and anthropocentrism mainly because it remains incapable of decentring itself from the problems and cultural horizon that have shaped its perspective of Reality and Nature. From its very beginning, what we call the Western mind (a state of mind resulting from the Greek and Judaeo-Christian cultural synthesis now predominantly identified with Europeans cultures) has been obsessed by the problem freedom through the cultivation of notions such as *ataraxia*, the *Polis*, Freewill, Natural rights (claimed against abusive governments), conventional rights (against the abuse of natural rights), individual and universal human rights, and more recently, free market and the global dissemination of democracy as the best ways to ensure people's freedom. The history of the Western mind has been shaped by a desire to free itself (and liberate others) from imposed tradition, tyranny, superstition, and so on. Foucault's critical *ethos*, again, is certainly not an exception.

As we have highlighted in our chapter on governmentality, the quest for freedom even became a "technology of power" serving the hyper-governmentalization by which more freedoms and perpetual resistance are encouraged in modern societies. Freedom and resistance are both encouraged for the invaluable information they relay to centres of governance now administering the "freedom" of the People according to consensual tendencies expressed by the Majority, and for the *impetus* such willingness to constantly innovate and profound dissatisfaction give to a capitalist and technologically-driven economy predicated upon notions such as constant growth and endless desires. Foucault's normative standpoint, best expressed in the words that "the only 'guarantee of freedom is freedom itself'" is thus nothing new under the sun (Foucault 2010, p. 245; Quoted in Tully 1999, p. 138). It is, on the contrary, the radicalization of a Western obsession that has been cultivated through centuries

of inner struggles, wars, conquests, colonization and domination to liberate: an obsession with a quest for achieving an ever-increasing freedom that nothing shall impeach, even a global and irreversible ecological disaster which may eradicate the diversity of life forms on Earth. Incapable of holding any normative goal higher than this circular and ultimately self-defeating quest for freedom—which in societies driven by the forces of a “free” capitalist economy often takes the form of this immediate fulfilment of our egoistic desires and the accumulation of endless goods in a context where we perceive each other as predators or competitors—the notion of an planetary ecological disaster caused by our collective ignorance and individual selfishness have little weight in the scale of things. Green governmentality scholars who endorse Foucault’s critical *ethos* regard with suspicion the processes by which the “problem of government” gets subjugated by various ecological rationalities increasingly framing our access to an “undetermined freedom.” Green governmentality scholars are particularly critical of concepts such as “endangered,” “sick” or “hazardous” Nature allegedly fuelling green biopolitical processes and practices of governmentalization, disciplines, eco-managerialism and ethics. Politics here would be increasingly subjugated by eco rationalities framing its agonistic features in a way that would jeopardize our possibilities of “being otherwise” than imagined or prescribed.

Although such critiques are often useful and insightful, we came to criticize what we identified as two normative implications related to such an *ethos*. First, this *ethos* feeds not only the reproductive pattern of liberal governmentality we have described earlier (which depends on freedom and resistance to deepen its grip and renew its potential), but also exacerbates one of the main causes of our ecological predicament by reframing the question of Nature in a anthropocentric tone by reducing it to merely to a question involving practices of freedom versus modes of domination—that is from a standpoint which concerns only

human actors. The ecological question, we must say, is thus in need of a paradigmatic shift of consciousness far beyond the popular antinomy between freedom and domination at the centre of Western thought since at least the so-called experience of European Enlightenment. Hence we return to our initial question: can we conceive Nature from an ontological standpoint that could include similar attributes to Foucault's genealogical approach while minimizing its anthropocentric and ethnocentric tendencies?

## 8. Discussion and Conclusion

Oliver's notions of "Pure experience" and "relational ontology" offer interesting alternatives in that regard. "Pure experience" means for Oliver that only relations are fundamentals at an ontological level. Relationality would thus inform our experience of Time and Space at the ontological level. To be more precise, Space and Time (as we commonly experience them) would be the outcomes of specific relations, and not the other way around. "Pure experience" can therefore be described in terms of "Pure immediacy" and "Pure act," in the sense that there would be fundamentally no separation between "here" and "there" or between our intent and act, because such categories would only be the product of our reflections on "Pure experience," which *gets ipso facto* spatialized and temporalized through its correlate: the experience of the Ego versus the World at the center of the subject/object paradigm. In sum, adopting a relational ontology rather than an historical ontology would thus broaden the decentring *impetus* against the domination of the Ego or I-centeredness already denounced by Foucault's critical *ethos*.

A second advantage of adopting a relational ontology consists in providing a canvas to negotiate our differences from an immanent standpoint, this without imposing or sacrificing any universality and particularity which may be expressed in the experience in question. A

relational ontology can help us to open ourselves to the plenum of an encounter, and to better attune with what we may perceive as otherness by inviting on an equal standing the relations by which the singularities of each and everyone are revealed. The framework of relational ontology can thus help us to understand the status of our differences and our inherent dynamism as something emerging through the relations we share, and not as the result of pre-existing states of self-containment. In the case that concerns us more specifically, a relational ontology can help us to go beyond the ethnocentric tendency of imposing our cultural understanding of temporality and historicity; a relational ontology may help us to understand that contingency and finitude are not fundamental ontological qualities of everything that exists, but rather the specific cultural understanding of a set of relations that can be experienced or conceptualized in different ways.

We should however be careful not to oppose cultural expressions and relationality, as if culture were only a distortion of something more true and authentic. The knowledge of relationality necessarily emerges through specific cultural narratives and experiences, which more or less accept or negate other cultural expressions of the relationality they share. By the expression “the relationality they share” I do not mean a more primordial Reality that would replace the function of absolute Time and Space in a Newtonian ontology; relationality rather constitutes the fundamental, immanent and immediate experience through which we experience *both* the difference and the unity of our conditions as interrelated relational beings. Following the formulation of Robin Durie, the project of suggesting “relational ontologies” can therefore be seen as an invitation to begin from relations as such, from which the sense of entities or regions as emerging from these relations is viewed as derivative, rather than beginning from some static conceptions of ontological regions, and then seeking how these “regions” may interact (Eckersley 2002, p. 162). It is to view our “attributions” or

“designations” as possessing a “double expressivity” to the extent that they are fundamentally relational and differential in their nature.

A third advantage of adopting a relational ontology resides in its capacity to create a broader sense of ecological relatedness without compromising the processes of differentiation without which the notions of singularity and discrimination are lost. The notion of relational ontologies can help us to understand Nature as an *active* field of infinite relationships through which emerge various singular entities by virtue of the relationships they have *with other than themselves to begin with*. As such, Nature would designate what always exceeds in a differential mode—and yet sustains—our conceptual constructs from the outset. In other words, a natural being is not considered ontologically independent by virtue of *that* which cannot be fractioned anymore at the risk of destroying what makes it precisely that (the atomistic view); what is irreducible are rather the inter-constitutive relations that all natural beings have with other than themselves by which they may receive, sustain and transmit life. To use Aristotelian formulation we alluded to in our first chapter, we could say that no passage from potentiality to actuality can rely solely on its own; the passage to actualization requires infinite interactions, which themselves can be viewed as integral to any form of actualization. Nature thus appears as a relational and open matrix of infinite relationships through which various natural beings constitute themselves through multileveled states of interactions and exchanges by which cyclical processes of regeneration, reproduction and destruction can be maintained.

By understanding Nature as an *active, responsive* and *dynamic* web of infinite relations in synch with the activities of our consciousness, we can also relax the grip of the Idealist\Realist paradigm which makes Nature or Reality either the product of our minds (either subjectively

or culturally) or a pre-existing and objective reality that our minds can only approximate.<sup>122</sup>

Both Nature and minds would emerge together in our experience of the world; that is through an ontological state of differentiation from the outset. As the Latin etymological root of the word “consciousness” formed by the coalescence of *cum* (“with”) and *scio* (“know”) already suggest, to be “conscious” means to “know with”; it suggests both a relation to something beside oneself (the introduction of a difference we may relate to), *and* a state of awakening to the experience of that relation itself. In that regard, nothing would be more remote as a point of departure for the experience of consciousness than Descartes’ atomistic *Ego sum* (which takes the Ego as its first object of truth). From a relational standpoint, there is no single point of departure for consciousness. Consciousness rather consists in an integrative *and* an expanding mode of relating to what is always beside oneself to begin with.

In other words, a relational standpoint encourages us to experience ourselves as constituted through an ever-expanding, dynamic and boundlessness relationality, which makes the limits between inside\outside a secondary topic if we agree that what constitutes our singularities and unity are mediated through dynamic and open relations which generate both simultaneously. As a result, the need to assert one’s cosmology by excluding (or barely tolerating) others can be relaxed. A relational commitment to ontology can help us to understand that the epistemological, pragmatic or metaphysical criteria by which an agreement could be negotiated must not precede, but rather emerge immanently from the encounters themselves. As such, a relational commitment would be inherently political; not from the standpoint of atomistic entities plunged in a “state of war” which politics must

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<sup>122</sup> As Purser, Park and Montuori suggests : “Our observations should not be interpreted to mean that the environment or Nature is merely the artefact of a collective social construction. That would amount to a form of ecological solipsism. Nature is not simply a product of the social world; it has properties that exist independent of humans (photosynthesis in plants has survival value and occurs regardless of our view of Nature). Rather, we are only trying to draw importance to the fact that social-construction processes are involved in shaping concepts of and relationships to Nature-that such processes are intertwined with epistemological, ontological, and ethical issues” (Purser, Park and Montuori 1995, p. 1058).

pacify, but from the understanding that relationality presupposes a number of minimum ethical guidelines built into the relational dimension of our existence as interdependent and ecological beings, such as the maximization of equal-standing with other beings, followed by the desire of dynamically harmonizing ourselves with the well-being of all other creatures and ecosystem known to us.

On a more philosophical note, the adoption of a relational standpoint could also produce an interesting alternative to the long-lasting debate opposing the One and the Many (or Singularity and Universality or Monism and Pluralism), cast in mutually-exclusive terms since at least the time of Parmenides and Heraclites. Adopting a relational paradigm by which relations are understood as that which *both* unites and differentiates us at an ontological level could initiate a profound shift impacting not only on our comprehension of Nature, but also on the Western conception of the self, which is mostly understood in atomistic terms as an agent progressing from dependency to independency as a sign of maturity (rather than focusing on increasing well-being through interdependence and interrelatedness).<sup>123</sup> Such a shift could also have significant impacts on the various Western cosmologies, haunted by the problem of finding a single cause or point of origin to the world (rather than accepting the impossibility of having a single point of origin for the world if we accept a relational ontology) or by the hierarchical understanding of ontology rating beings from dependent (inferior) to independent (superior).

Again, if we agree that a relation is immediately the bearer of both differences *and* unity, we no longer need to evoke a quasi-transcendental historicity to secure the processes of

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<sup>123</sup> As Purser, Park and Montuori suggest, the Egocentric mode of organization which predominates in Western societies assumes a self-contained individual, “a sovereign agent, whose personal sense of identity is constructed and felt to be contained within the ‘private’ boundary of his or her skin-encased body”. As such, “Egocentric organizations” conceive of their identity as existing in opposition to the larger socioecological environment” (Purser, Park and Montuori 1995, p. 1062-64).

differentiation by which the genealogical method is justifying our ability to seize difference, hence the activity of critical thinking. The experience of differentiation can be conceived as immanent to relations themselves (which precisely implies a difference to be a relation). The cultivation of such relational *ethos* could release the grip of an assimilative form of historicism when we negotiate with holders of different worldviews the meanings of Nature; this by understanding that we do not need an overarching historicity that makes all cosmologies only transient and cultural constructions to generate critical thinking. We only need to take the qualitative aspect of the relations we share with others a bit more seriously while considering what I call “being-through-relationality,” that is a state of consciousness that understands the dynamic character of the relations by which we constitute different comprehension of Nature and reality together through our differences, this not through the lens of an objective movement between distinct parts, but from a shared modality of affect. Politically speaking, the adoption of such a relational *ethos* could possibly be of significant help in negotiating environmental issues between peoples with conflicting worldviews about Nature. Such an *ethos* could also contribute to deepening the process of decolonization by which the Western cultures have subjugated various peoples by imposing their cosmology, their way of telling history, and their notion of time.

## Conclusion

Many scholars and activists have suggested that we need a profound shift of consciousness when it comes to our relationships with Nature (for example, Naess 2008, Merchant 2005, Mathews 2005, Eckersley 2003). More than just greening existing political ideas, institutions or technologies, they suggest that we need to critically engage the paradigms by which we conceive the meaning of culture, happiness, justice, equality and freedom. The question we are now facing is quite straightforward: do we have the collective capacity to halt and reverse the course of an unsustainable paradigm of civilization which feeds on our egocentric desires to consume an ever greater quantity of goods and our craving for unrestricted liberties in face of a political system triggering these cravings precisely by restricting certain liberties while allowing others through the expression of our resistances and demands to be governed better? The problem here would lie in our aspiration for freedom itself, and not simply the particularities of its modulation.

Our dissertation has chosen to engage this question by focusing on the ontological and metaphysical assumptions found in Michel Foucault's notion of governmentality. This notion is increasingly used by various scholars to problematize the entry of ecological rationalities of government described as green. Green governmentality scholars regard with suspicion the processes by which our freedom and politics get subjugated by various ecological rationalities. The concept of governmentality implies a critical *ethos* predicated upon constructivist and pluralist premises, which conceive our understanding of truth and subjectivity as relative to the finite, contingent and historical practices in which we are embedded. As we have seen, this notion offers a powerful tool to critically engage and unpack any overarching principles of rationality or normative claims that would attempt to supersede

our experiences by evoking an aprioristic or transcendental standpoint, including the well-being of what we call “Nature.”

Although other concepts or thinkers could have been chosen to problematize what are often labelled as post-modern philosophical premises, we have chosen Michel Foucault as primary interlocutor not only because his work is still a major influence on a variety of innovative approaches in the human sciences, but because his thinking summarizes well the thrust of a powerful way to understand freedom and critical thinking. Foucault’s concept of governmentality offers one of the more robust analyses of the “problem of government” accurately describing the condition of our modern societies. In addition, Foucault’s way of depicting freedom *as that which is constantly resisting any attempt to frame it in toto* reveals both our best shot at envisioning transformation, and the symptom of an ethics enslaved by its own solipsistic circularity, namely, an ethics that puts the pursuit of an undefined notion of freedom before the concrete relations which sustain it. Unfortunately, it is our contention that Foucault’s critical *ethos* remains insufficient to address the paradigm shift that would allow us to move beyond our solipsistic, anthropocentric, psychopathic—and in this case Eurocentric—ways of interacting with non-human beings with whom we share this dynamic yet fragile process we call life.

Our dissertation began by exploring the rise of an environmental movement as part of the New Social Movements: more precisely its fragmentation, co-option and recuperation by what we described as an overarching and all-penetrating “rationality of government” best accounted for by the concept of governmentality coined by Michel Foucault. We have then analyzed the concept of governmentality in relation to the ecological question. More precisely, we have explored the notion of governmentality as an analytical tool by which we could better

understand the emergence of various political rationalities influenced by an overarching and managerial “rationality of government” targeting the well-being of population in terms of security and political economy. We have argued that this “rationality of government” constitutes the dominant framework within which ecological rationalities have emerged first as elements of contestation, later to be co-opted as rationalities justifying deeper modes of regulation.

Exploring the concept of governmentality in Michel Foucault’s work, we have shown how his “microphysics of power” was first deployed to contrast the power of sovereignty with disciplinary power. We then explored how this microphysics was redirected in Foucault’s work toward the genealogical exploration of the modern state to unpack the “problem of government.” This analysis provided us with an analytical framework by which we could explore the underlying and often unaccounted-for structures and rationalities by which we legitimize and organize our societies both in terms of disciplinary regulations (through individualizing techniques) and mass normalization (through the use of statistics), highlighting the effects of power rising from the *means* by which we govern ourselves and others. This analytical framework has been helpful to show how green rationalities of government are basically subjugated by pre-existing disciplinary regulations and mass normalization, leaving little room for the profound societal and ethical transformations advocated by “radical” ecologists and environmentalists to take place.

This analysis also provided an explanation accounting for both the legitimacy of resistance and the historical transformations of governmental regimes, not according to a grand historical Spirit realizing itself through the progressive march of civilization, or from the standpoint of a human rationality always identical to itself, but from the standpoint of contingent practices of

government and practices of resistance responding agonistically to one another. This analysis made it clear that the assemblage of our subjectivity and the ways in which we govern ourselves and others emerge from subtle and disparate practices operating not only at the level of what we conceive as “true” (i.e. our ethical, ontological, epistemological and metaphysical beliefs), but also from the technologies we use to govern ourselves (processes of individualization, sanitation, numeralization, standardization, normalization, commercialization, industrialization and so on).

We then suggested that Foucault’s critical ethos, built into his governmentality studies, is itself the latest psychological manifestation of advanced liberal governmentality. We have argued that the quest for freedom became a “technology of power” through the encouragement of freedoms and perpetual resistance in advanced liberal societies. We showed that in these societies, freedom and resistance are encouraged for the invaluable information they relay to centres of governance now administrating the “freedom” of the People according to consensual tendencies expressed by the Majority, and for the impetus such willingness to constantly innovate and profound dissatisfaction gives to a capitalist and technologically-driven economy predicated upon notions such as constant growth and endless desires. Our argument has been that Foucault’s critical *ethos* fits perfectly this psychological drive—this yoking of critique with futurist and resisting inclinations—which fuels the perpetuation of such societal organization.

Although it can be argued that Foucault is sensitive to culture not only as a set of constraints, but also as a platform to resist other possible modes of domination, it is clear that Foucault’s comprehension of emancipation is geared toward an understanding of freedom according to which freedom must prevail over the dangers of social and cultural conformity. Even if the

assemblage of subjectivity can be challenged from a Foucaultian standpoint by privileging an analysis focussing on the dynamic processes by which we constitute ourselves as individuals in a given societal framework (itself open and mobile), we argued that Foucault's hostility toward any metaphysical or ontological aprioristic notions is akin to the liberal opposition to traditional metaphysics.

We therefore suggested that it is not a surprise that scholars who use the notion of governmentality to problematize the current ecologization of politics grant no objective existence or inherent normative status to Nature. In other words, it is not a surprise that Nature is depicted by them as a social construct loaded with normative and cognitive assumptions that present both opportunities in terms of displacement and resistance and danger in terms of facilitating new modes of domination, especially when yielded to the current disciplinary and normalization paradigm best described by Foucault in terms of biopolitics. Hence our charge that the agonistic understanding of freedom, which leads to the hyper-constructivism deployed in Foucault's critical ethos, is not really interested in relating to anything other than itself, i.e. the impetus by which it reproduces itself *ad infinitum*. Foucault's critical *ethos*, like most liberal theories advocating the greening of the so-called public sphere, is more interested in saving the status of an undefined freedom resulting from an agonistic understanding of pluralism, than accepting the constraining aspects of relating with the interests and well-being of non-human beings—viewed here as merely constructed by our diverging cultural fantasies.

The second part of our dissertation went on to explore the concept of ontology to show that Foucault's treatment of such a notion is itself the outcome of a particular cultural and cosmological itinerary, culminating with the emergence of a modern and scientific culture trumping epistemology and pragmatism over ontology and speculative metaphysics. We have

shown that Foucault's treatment of ontology and the pluralist and constructivist framework it assumes is not the product of self-evident truths "free" from any metaphysical influences, but rather a particular modulation of a specific cosmology entangled in various metaphysical claims. More precisely, we have suggested that Foucault's historicization of ontology and his "metaphysics of will" can be traced back to some metaphysical decisions articulated by the Christian doctrine of creation. We have proposed that Foucault's treatment of ontology results from a secularized understanding of cosmological premises in the Christian doctrine of Creation, which demoted the Greek philosopher from deducing aprioristically the logos of the universe.

By positing the ultimate Alpha point as the product of God's will (the Creation), we have argued that the Christian doctrine of Creation has contributed to the conceptualization of a universal and finite historical time, geared toward an apocalyptic end only known to God. We made the argument to the effect that the notions of historicity (whose beginning and end remain inscrutable to human reason), freewill, finitude and irrationalism implicit in the Christian worldview are central to the articulation of Foucault's historical ontology. In their (post)modern and secular articulations, these notions have contributed to an understanding of truth subsumed under the contingent and finite practices by which truth is formulated: the difference being that the notion of freewill is here stripped of any center of agency and overarching principle of rationality by Foucault. Instead, freedom is explained in terms of random practices and counter-practices whose historical, contingent and finite conditions impeach any totalizing attempts in terms of control and predictions (Foucault's historical ontology). Our contention has been that such an account produces a totalizing explanation which arrogates the meaning of temporality in terms of linear contingency and finitude (historicity), while positing a metaphysical understanding of freedom in relation to culture and

Nature which makes any discourse only a finite and contingent construct bound to its own Heraclitean flux.

We also argued to the effect that the metaphysical decisions inherited from the Christian doctrine of Creation have facilitated the rise of a modern and scientific culture dominated by the fact\value distinction, empirical experimentation (to support universal prediction), the adoption of historical time, the disenchantment of Nature, instrumentalism, pragmatism and inductive modes of reasoning. By dividing the realm of Creation between theological and empirical truths, the Christian doctrine of creation has facilitated a dualistic representation of Reality caught between the empirical and the transcendental. Such a dualistic representation predicated on the existence of a perfect God has downplayed the power of human rationality, perceived here as inherently fallible and finite. This lack of trust in human rationality, which has facilitated an epistemic shift toward an experimental and empirical method of verification, has been central not only to the rise of modernity and the scientific culture, but also to the so-called post-modern movement. In particular, we have showed that Foucault's critical *ethos* has inherited many metaphysical assumptions associated with the culture of modernity, including its emphasis on historicity (making everything that exists of a contingent and finite nature), its belief in the primacy of materialistic causes over non-materialistic ones, its instrumental understanding of rationality (as a pragmatic means toward an end), its nominalism (its negation of metaphysical entities), its disenchantment of Nature (there is no such thing as Nature), its obsession with perpetually replacing one set of things, systems, beliefs or practices with more accurate ones (instead of trusting the normative inputs of tradition), and its belief in an open-ended human condition (there is no such thing as a human essence or permanent condition).

From there, we argued that the question of ontology has certainly been reintroduced by green or eco governmentality scholars, but only to get politicized in a very specific way. Ontology is here no longer an attempt to understand Reality or Nature as a coherent whole of which we are part, but rather an attempt to show that such an endeavour is bound to fail from the start. In sum, we argued that the critical *ethos* by which green governmentality scholars invite us to resist any forms of naturalism is a cluster of those two ontological commitments: an ontological emphasis on historicity and praxis. We then argued that the alignment of these two ontological commitments is the product of a specific culture, which not only forecloses the possibility of relating to what is radically other (in this case “Nature”), but also assimilates and gradually dissolves other worldviews by dictating the ontological terms which make them necessarily historical and finite narratives, fundamentally made of open-ended practices irreducible to any transcendental or universal truths. Our contention has been that Foucault’s treatment of ontology not only suffers from anthropocentrism, but also assumes a universalistic ontological canvas which displays subtle Eurocentric tendencies.

In an attempt to offer a solution, we have explored the idea of a relational ontology instead of an historical ontology. Although we can certainly find a relational dimension at the core of Foucault’s work, we have suggested that Foucault’s relationality remains framed by a historical ontology which impose a specific way of understanding the world and ourselves in terms of radical contingency, finitude and impermanence. By being relational instead of historical, we have suggested that a relational ontology can provide the basis for an open-ended and dynamic worldview that does not operate against the backdrop of a homogenizing form of temporal universalism or constructivism, but rather poses the immanent differences and processes of diversification we are experiencing as the unifying and harmonizing

principle by which we can rethink a more thorough egalitarian and non-anthropocentric standpoint for ecological thinking.

Problematizing the cultural, metaphysical and epistemological heritage of Newtonianism and Mechanistic materialism (fact\value distinction, matter\spirit dualism\dead-like matter dissociated with the realm of Life), we have argued that Foucault still bears the influence of both the temporal and spatial disjunctions which we attributed following Harold H. Oliver to the subject/object paradigm and its Newtonian modulation through Mechanistic materialism. Although it is certainly true that contemporary physics has surpassed Newtonian physics in many ways, we have insisted that the contemporary comprehensions of the universe (or cosmology) are still framed by an overarching ontological notion that precedes the unfolding of relationality itself. Consequently, relationality is still not accounted as an ontological principle in its own right, which explains why pluralism and monism are still the two main solutions when it comes to explain the fundamental structure of reality.

Our dissertation has proposed the solution of relational ontology as a “middle path” to resolve the philosophical problem opposing monism to pluralism. More precisely, we have suggested that a relational ontology could offer an alternative to the way in which we come to understand the organization of a world predicated upon the existence of entities in atomistic terms. From the standpoint of a relational ontology, relations are not contained in an absolute time and space; rather, our understanding of time and space results from specific and more fundamental relations. In the same vein, we argued that subject and object are not absolutized at the expense of the other. Both are rather accounted as co-aspectual features derived from experience if we agree that a relation is immediately the bearer of both differences and unity. Hence, we would no longer need to evoke a quasi-transcendental historicity to secure the

processes of differentiation by which the genealogical method is justifying our ability to seize difference. The experience of differentiation can simply be conceived as immanent in relations themselves (which precisely implies difference to be a relation). Hence it is possible to release the grip of an assimilative form of historicism when we negotiate with holders of different worldviews the meanings of Nature; this, by understanding that we do not need an overarching historicity that makes all cosmologies only transient and cultural constructions to generate critical thinking. We only need to understand the dynamic character of relations from a standpoint we described as a shared modality of inter-constitutive affects.

Ecologically speaking, we have suggested that a relational ontology could promote a broader sense of ecological relatedness without compromising the processes of differentiation without which the notions of singularity and discrimination are lost. The notion of relational ontologies can help us to understand Nature as an active field of infinite relationships through which emerge various singular entities by virtue of the relationships they have with others than themselves to begin with. As such, a natural being is not considered ontologically independent by virtue of its irreducible form, essence or nature; what are irreducible are rather the inter-constitutive relations that all natural beings have with others than themselves by which they may receive, sustain and transmit life. By understanding Nature as an active, responsive and dynamic web of infinite relations in synch with the activities of our consciousness, it is possible to relax the grip of the Idealist\Realist paradigm which makes Nature or Reality either the product of our minds (either subjectively or culturally) or a pre-existing and objective reality that our minds can only approximate. Both Nature and our minds would emerge together in our experience of the world. From a relational standpoint, there is indeed no single point of departure for consciousness. Consciousness rather consists

in an integrative and ever-expanding mode of relating to what is always beside oneself to begin with.

The need to assert one's cosmology by excluding (or barely tolerating) others can therefore be relaxed. A relational commitment to ontology can help us to understand that the epistemological, pragmatic or metaphysical criteria by which an agreement could be negotiated must not precede, but rather emerge immanently from the encounters themselves. Consequently, a relational commitment is inherently political; not from the standpoint of atomistic entities plunged in a "state of war" which politics must either pacify (Hobbes) or keep in a fighting mode (Schmitt to Foucault), but from the understanding that relationality presupposes a number of minimum ethical guidelines built into the relational dimension of our existence as interdependent and ecological beings, such as the maximization of equal-standing with other beings followed by the desire of dynamically harmonizing ourselves with the well-being of all other creatures and ecosystems known to us. As such, the adoption of a relational ontology challenges the way in which we have deduced freedom from the principle of "that-which-stands-on-its own," a notion central to what stands as an enduring tendency of attributing superiority and primacy to what we see as "causing" while not being "caused" (i.e. ontological independence) versus what are regarded as inferior states of dependency.

Hence, a relational ontology challenges the hierarchical understanding of the world in which states of independency are posited as superior to states of dependency. All beings and cultures are valued in terms of the *relations* that generate differences: hence ecologically, rather than anthropocentrically. A relational ontology can thus be understood as an *ethos* or attitude that encourages a greater state of awareness toward the relational dimensions of our existence. It is an attitude or a disposition that challenges the very assumptions by which we frame what is

fundamental about our experience of reality or Nature. In particular, it challenges both the monistic and pluralistic tendencies by which we came to imagine Reality either as an absolute One or a number of irreducible ones. A relational ontology emphasizes relations as dynamic and open-ended ontological constituents of our consciousness, and encourages us to attune ourselves accordingly.

By suggesting a relational ontology, it has been the hope of this dissertation to foster a language that may facilitate a renewed sense of wonder and appreciation toward all human and non-human relations supporting our existences. By contributing to the understanding that our differences emerge through the relations we share from a more radical standpoint—that is by tuning ourselves to a greater state of receptivity described by Oliver as “Pure experience”—we are calling for a political change within ourselves: a shift of consciousness. Shifting the urge to resist, conquer or exploit whatever comes our way to embrace a state of awakening to our relational and co-dependant condition may be a first step in the direction of a more fulfilling and happy political paradigm.

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