Critique as Historical Practice:

Exploring the Politics of Emancipation

by

Andréa Browning
B.A., University of Western Ontario, 2007

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Abstract

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In this thesis, I explore how the logic and mobilization of critique as an emancipatory practice, situated within various historical inheritances of the Enlightenment project, enable/delimit ‘Western’ political imaginations. I therefore question how discourses and practices of critique not only reproduce but become functional to that which they seek to transform. That is, through its conventional fault-finding role, how does critique regulate (un)acceptable ways of thinking? By resituating critique as integrally constitutive of our inheritances, rather than an exceptional instrument of correction or virtue, this methodological reorientation has the potential to foster explorations that are grounded within, as opposed to transcendently outside, our complex sites of inheritances. In this way, it is an inquiry into the histories and politics of Western projects of emancipation and progress as captured by practices, methods, and subjects of critique within various influential traditions.
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INTRODUCTION

Introductory Notes and Contextualizing Questions: Critique as Historical Practice

Throughout this essay, I explore how practices of critique – as they involve our attempts to (not) be governed in certain ways by (not) accepting certain truths – are implicated in various games of logic that function through particular subjects, rules, norms, anxieties, desires, and effects which demand to be confronted in terms of their historical mobilizations. To make claims to the critical, as if it were merely an ahistorical quality or moral status, without engaging the less than noble histories of critical projects raises the problem of nobility itself in making possible our justificatory claims to critical thought and praxis. I thus work through various experimental encounters within the Enlightenment project from a concern for how it has enabled/delimited ‘Western’ political imaginations through a critical ethos that functions as their stabilizing governmentality. That is, I seek to understand what critique does as a process that resists certain truths in order to propose something better or more accurate, and what the effects of critique are in then regulating (un)acceptable ways of thinking. In brief, I am asking that we consider how critique functions as a morality as much as a political epistemology. I am particularly interested in engaging the politics of critique by problematizing its mobilization as an emancipatory praxis conditioned by methodological orientations that deny its very aporetic conditions of possibility. In denying the struggles and queries that make possible its projects, this critical ethos, in effect, cannot deliver its promises of emancipations; rather, it governs its willing participants through its formative aspirations for freedom and its anxieties to escape the uncertainties through which it is instigated.

These inquires are motivated by a frustration with how critique and resistance within influential emancipatory traditions are implicated in Western epistemological
projects that rely upon a *praxis of the self*: a praxis that demands a model of subjectivity and governance founded in escapist, often theological, desires toward freedom. If we understand critique as a form of self-reflexivity dependent on a Kantian limit-analysis and politics of finitude that centre ‘Man’ as the sovereign source of knowledge, judgement, and action – a form that is denotative of certain readings of the Enlightenment and its legacies – resistance seems to imply a corresponding transgression of limits that translates into a form of self-governance imbued with ethical and theological constructions of *the good life*. Given the necessary recognition of the disjuncture between reality and appearance, often expressed through questions of materialism/idealism, structure/agency, collectivity/individuality, and empiricity/transcendentality, among others, to frame the problematic of critique and resistance in terms of a lack (that is, as if we are sovereign yet so strive to know ourselves, our knowledge, our limits, our finitude) presupposes the existence and desirability of fullness, completion, and perfection. Hence the theological character of the sovereign, escapist subject who lacks full self-transparency and yet is held accountable in such ways. Hence, also, the problematic of freedom and its myriad Western projects of emancipation and progress.

Given that critique can never evade these demands of a modern subjectivity to carve out a pure space of exploration, it is important to think about what it means to be critical, especially as processes of classification, authorizations of meaning and authority, and various other regulative practices. It is to accept that critique does not, by its very virtue, endow us with freedom, but that it is as entangled in the messy political, historical, epistemic, metaphysical, and ethical relations as that which it seeks to engage. Such a methodological reorientation toward these negotiations, rather than toward the epistemic
emancipations of critique, has the potential to reframe practices of critique in more productive ways, while taking its stakes even more seriously.

In this context, I am motivated to question several modalities of critique from a concern for how the very move of critique entails a distancing of oneself from the world in order to question or ascertain something different. This move in effect produces a morality established primarily through the relationship of the self to the self and only secondarily of the self to the world. That is to say, I am concerned with how critique as a praxis of the self constitutes a moral or an ethical field in which to solipsistically understand one’s relationship to one’s world. In presupposing that one’s self is primary and one’s engagement with the world is secondary, critique (and resistance as its praxis) becomes self-government, realized through the discourses and practices of freedom, autonomy, alienation, and maturation – focal themes that I explore through the provocative and influential traditions that I negotiate throughout this project. By (re)affirming a subject-centred framework (or subject-centred reason), I am therefore asking how strategies of critique (re)produce the very (dis)order that they seek to resist.

These moves, made possible only by an individuated self, set up an unproductive divide between the ethical as ‘easy’ self-oriented work and the political as (un)decidability. They designate individuality as a non-collectivity that demands less from us in coming to terms with our actions, turning the political into mere moral calculations of good/evil, as if good/evil could be more easily established through the security of the stable, bounded self. Correspondingly, the collectivity of the political remains undecidable, and so demands decidability, because it cannot safely be contained within the presumed individualist totality whose boundaries are somehow more fixed.
These simplistic claims to individuality/collectivity urge me to consider the effects of advancing the subject as the locus of critique and resistance. Is it enough, for example, to simply reconceptualize the subject through its intersubjectivity while continuing to afford it the same function in critique and resistance? I refer here to a function often attributed in Western thought to the Kantian critical project of Enlightenment, which seeks to know knowledge and its limits thereby creating a relationship of the self to self, a self-reflexivity turned into a governmentality of the self. Given that resistance is functional to order as its constitutive outside, it is imperative to trouble the desire for inside/outside alternatives in addressing these difficult questions of individuality and collectivity, notably in how they implicate particular models of ethics and politics. Moreover, the very notion of limits that often sets up these facile models of subjectivity and governance operationalizes an inside/outside that we must confront in the self-reflexivity of critique because of how this form of immanence privileges the self as a somehow less transcendental space. To grapple with these complex dynamics, I approach these traditions of critique on largely methodological terms, appreciating how a sort of governmentality (trapped not in pure immanence or transcendence) makes possible these technologies of governing thought and praxis that constitute particular ontologies and subjectivities of the political.

Herein I locate the organizing argument of this thesis, which seeks to offer an analysis of the historicity and politics of practices of critique in methodological terms. It is not a survey of the canon of Western political thought poised to reveal the drive of critique, nor is it a systematic engagement with the secondary literature grappling with these legacies. The history that I am proposing is therefore not of its attempts to account
for itself, a justificatory objectification of events, people, systems, and the like (a constitute history of sorts), but rather one of mobilizations that challenges instrumentalities and temporalities as its conditions of possibility (a modulated history of sorts). It is a history that enables negotiations of the effects of its projects by not heeding the call of virtue that coheres most narratives of our present existence and inheritances, by not striving to demystify ourselves and our pasts/presents/futures in a noble effort to progress or emancipate. Yet it is a history that does not in opposition seek to mechanistically render all of these tensions mere instruments of our humanity. However much this historicity that I propose may appeal to generalities, these generalities are merely of a class of sociological reflections on the formative problems and questions that I argue structurally mark the conditions of critical engagement in the traditions that I negotiate.

The specific textual sites that I have selected to work through these problems of the structural models of subjectivity and governance captured by critique are somewhat incidental, and so are intended merely to provoke possibilities of engagement in the sorts of sociological, political, cultural, and philosophical reflections that I initiate in this text. Certainly not extracting myself from these imperatives of the critical ethos that I problematize, I am not advocating an escape from critique or its modern subjectivities, but a reorienting of our aspired objectives for its projects. That is, I argue that the overwhelming modern commitment to an immanent critique negates the aporias that make possible our very attempts at critical projects. The classificatory tyranny of the critical and the dogmatic locks itself into a solipsism that does not allow us to address what I argue is effectively at stake in critical projects – not the ability to distinguish right
from wrong, epistemically or morally, but our aptitude to negotiate the demands that place those difficult questions as our inheritances. I refer here to the demands and consequences of our attempts to free ourselves from our modern subjectivity/objectivity, from the empirico-transcendentalty of Man that sets the (dis)qualifiers of the (non)human subject of modern critical projects.

In this way, I have sought to inflect these anxieties of our immanence into the tone and structure of this text so as to bring out its hold on us. If caricatured, generalized, parodied, or hyperbolic at times, I invite these challenges as productive methodological tensions (between us as readers/writers) to facilitate a confrontation with the formative roles that these anxieties play in structuring our critical projects – of course, with the hope that this lived appreciation for their command might enable us to better negotiate their demands. If this text then at least serves this polemic, I accept the requisite discomfort of these inquiries as its ensuing productivity. I thus use the specific sites offered in this text to exemplify how we respond (dare I say, the only ways that we know how to respond) to the immanence of our modernities, captured by the anxieties and desires of our critical projects. I am arguing that we loosen our tight grasp on immanence as definitive of our modernities and cease lamenting over the finitude of Man’s existence, so that it might be possible to question how this finitude fixes our claims to the critical. The consequence of this firm grasp on immanence as identity and claim, based on a repudiation of the transcendental as the prerequisite for a critical engagement with the world, secures the haunting of subjectivity that I seek to problematize as a facile dividuation of the self from the world: indeed, the (dis)qualifications of modern subjectivity and its (un)supporting (ir)ratonialities. The accompanying ambition to
wrench ourselves from the dogmatisms of the transcendental gives form to a desire to work over the (in)finite, privileging immanence as somehow more intelligible and the self as somehow less transcendental than their opposing analytics. Herein I locate my call for critique as a practice, grounded in a rather mundane reclamation of its conceptual and political organizations so as to work toward negotiation rather than escapism.

My concern is thus with the demands of critique, which insist upon a modernization and developmentalism toward freedom: a sort of Kantian freedom of an immanently transcendental subject secured by the emancipations of a critical relationship of the self to the self, or, the self to its finitude. I inquire into these formative demands of critique not as if they constitute unique practices of modernity, but rather as particular historical mobilizations of the critical project. These mobilizations in turn require an autonomous space, such as of a purified polis with secure boundaries, which gives form to a dangerous desire to escape from our world in the name of beautiful ideals. To problematize these totalizing fantasies of particular, indeed hegemonic, cultures (and their claims to the starting point for politics) is not radical or extreme: thinkers from across the political spectrum have noted how these liberal imperatives function as regulative ideals constitutive of a particular subjectivity, even those within their traditions (such as exemplary of the Marxian challenge). This move does not need to end up in paralysis; it is simply a demand for different negotiations of these transcendental desires for the freedom of a functionally sacred realm. So these questions lead me to engage the epistemic politics of critique, particularly through its dependence on mechanisms of a limit-analysis trapped in the language of exceptionalism, rupture, risk, immanence, and openings. To question critique’s exceptionality is thus to resituate its practices as
integrale constitutive of our inheritances.

My primary motivation in working through this project is a dissatisfaction with the modalities of critique and resistance that we now have available, notably as expressed through modernity/postmodernity and old left/new left theory and praxis. In situating my inquiries within conceptual inheritances of the Enlightenment project and what is generally understood as modernity in the West, I seek not to afford a privileged status to Western thought, but to struggle with how it has enabled/delimited our political imaginations. I come to these questions acknowledging histories of struggles, privileging not a sense of order and continuity in history, but rather people’s attempts to institute, negotiate, and resist order. By locating ourselves in response to various rich and conflicting traditions, we could perhaps more productively reflect on and negotiate our inheritances as sites of complicated exchanges. The most dominating and suffocating of these inheritances for me, as one who has straddled the first and third worlds in my own intimate experiences and intellectual explorations and who has consistently been dominated by the hegemonic allure of the former or its reversed reproduction of subordination, are those of the modern Western traditions of thought that set out so much of our imaginations – by our, of course, I refer to people such as myself who have lived the dominance of the West in its epistemological, ontological, and political demands. It is from these struggles that I pose these questions of critique and resistance: of an exhaustion, necessity, and desire for disrupting the ceaseless reproductions of that which we attempt to resist. Herein lies the significance of our constant struggle and conversation with our inheritances and the possibilities therein – in more productively trying to make sense of our convergences and divergences at sites of contestations. These meditations
remain largely in an exploratory imaginary, yet I hope to ground them in specificity as I continue to work through their various, conflicting implications on us.

Methodologically, I have approached this project through a *bricolage* of sorts: a reflexive, complex, collage-like creation in which I attempt to make meaningful connections within a messy body of intellectual inheritances. These processes do not function as a free space for play, but as a series of experimentations in tracing the implications of dominant practices of critique. They are my attempt to grapple with the intellectual resources that make up these problems in ways that cannot be contained by any singular method. I appreciate that the sorts of inquiries that I am pursuing here rely upon strategic generalizations, mobilizations, and quite frankly, inspirations from the wildly diverse works and figures with whom I engage. However, given my motivations in this project, I hope that my methodological approach proves helpful in an inquiry of intellectual inheritances that are always already embedded in fragmentary, inconsistent, and not easily traceable influences. Although at times I point to more nuanced debates and influences, my ultimate defense is a degree of awareness of how I approach these complex sites of inheritances and a commitment to exploring within, rather than transcendentally outside, these difficult discussions.

*Cartographies of a History (or, Your Reader’s Manual)*

I have chosen to engage the problematic of critique through several historical attempts to negotiate the implicated subject and movement of its projects – from the Kantian challenge of limits, negativity, and finitude to various responses to the aporias of modernity that seek to ascribe to critique an emancipatory function. Herein I refer to
aporias to denote the struggles of a modern existentialism of sorts: a Kantian modernity that secures Man in the insecure status of being both subject and object of his reason. From this centralizing theme, I evoke the aporetic throughout my explorations in the hopes to convey a sort of uncertainty that need not be relegated to scepticism or relativism, for it does not demand resolution – it is internal to logic itself and enables an indeterminacy that must not conclude in nihilism. It is not an anomaly or a contradiction to be worked over, but must reside in wonder and negotiation. It grows from the irony that facilitates a deferential uncertainty, not obsessed with the truth or falsity that a contradiction obscures. The aporetic, as I am proposing here, is thus located within a logic of sense, as opposed to the inconsistencies of a line of reasoning; it does not impede the sense of the logic, but enables it. For the purposes of this project, I have primarily set Michel Foucault’s struggles with the aporetic tensions expressive of some dominant inheritances as a site to think through the sorts of questions that I am posing. I have been interested in exploring, through his early to late works, empiricity/transcendentality as a problem of history, politics, and subjectivity, as well as the problems of limits, margins, ruptures, exclusions, disorder, and unreason as techniques inherent to critique as a rational, emancipatory practice. Through these inquiries, I thus struggle with the metaphysics and moralities of critique’s epistemological praxis and its requisite forms of subjectivity.

In this context, I begin the first chapter of this text by setting out the Kantian challenge of critique, with its commitments to limits, negativity, and finitude, as a way to interrogate what an immanent orientation entails, or rather, an immanent transcendence or a transcendental immanence. As a method and subjectivity, the Kantian project poses
these questions self-reflexively to critical thought to open a rather telling struggle with the epistemological and ontological conditions of possibility for truth, authority, and ethics. I then gesture at the Schmittian challenge to thinking immanence/transcendence, notably in how it is always already entangled in questions of the profane and the divine through secularizations of the theological – through the necessary, structural demands of the social and the metaphysical within the context of politics (or political theology), modern scientificity, and the corresponding depoliticizations of these negotiations of limits.

This preliminary framework then enables me to experiment with some potential formulations of these problematics of critique through two particular textual sites: Foucault’s *The Order of Things* and *History of Madness*. Through the former, I explore how empiricity/transcendentality as a problem of history, politics, and subjectivity informs how claims to critique get caught within appeals to the (in)finite, through which struggles against it only intensify its hold on critical thought. Haunted especially by dominant traditions of the philosophy of the subject, I engage with Foucault’s methodological negotiations of the accompanying problematics of order, similitude, representation, and discourse to reflect on how these games of logic constitute critique as a practice. Through the latter, I question the invocation of limits, ruptures, exclusions, disorder, and unreason in ways that strip critique of its exceptionality to challenge its methodological claims to instrumentality, correction, and virtue. This approach requires a confrontation with the politics of truth, desire, passion, alienation, freedom, and guilt to get at critique’s claims to exceptional proceduralism. Although I exhibit a fair degree of irreverence toward Foucault’s periodized historical readings of these problematics, I hope
that the nature of these reflections enables them to provide productive points of departure for thinking through the logic and mobilization of critique. These questions, situated through Foucauldian concerns for (un)reason and (dis)order – that is, for the epistemic politics or politicized epistemologies of the repertoires of Western thought – thus set a context in which to interrogate practices of critique more closely.

In the second chapter of this text, I push Foucault’s more explicit struggles with the methodological tensions that haunt the epistemic and ontological demands of the emancipatory, transformative, transgressive, disruptive, subversive, or however else we choose to express/deny the structural ethics of critical thought and praxis. I take on his formulations of a critical ethos, notably as tied to his late works on “the care of the self” and the politics of truth, to problematize how these virtuous conceptions of critique (of the philosophy of critique) disavow the aporetic conditions that make possible any critical project. To put it otherwise, I am concerned with how aspirations for the “desubjugation of the subject” through an aesthetic and moral self-stylization get caught in a solipsistic immanence reflective of dominant tendencies of critical thought and praxis – tendencies mired in self-righteous moralizing, structural paranoia, and the purifying martyrdom of ‘We the People’ that seems to ask for its heroic defeat in self-intensifying the struggle of beautiful souls.

My concern with this ‘turn’ in Foucault’s work, whose tensions and ambiguities I take to be exemplary of ethical projects in contemporary critical theory, is with how it secures critique as the method for becoming free. It implicates freedom as an epistemological praxis trapped in a juridical model of critique, and thus invokes an emancipatory desire to recover our subjectivity – a form of modern existentialism,
indeed. I must thus ask what this ‘critical’ privileging of exercises of the self on the self, as a form of resistance, demands as a methodological orientation, and how potential reorientations could challenge the implicated subjects and effects. In response, I work through how the (non)human in the legitimizing function of the (dis)qualifier for critique cannot serve as our point of entry, whether in the form of a Kantian disciplinarity/maturation or a Foucauldian care of the self against “subjectivation”.

Along these lines of inquiry, I take up Foucault’s critical project, and bring in Judith Butler’s negotiation of this reworking of critical ethical and political philosophy, to get at what I feel still haunts methodologies of critique. Through probing these efforts to imbue critique with a virtue ‘beyond’ judgement, with its corresponding ethical problem of freedom, I question the epistemic politics of critique, notably in its mobilization as a limit-analysis operationalized through immanent risks and ruptures. Given its status as a trendy analytic in contemporary critical thought, a seductively dangerous methodological orientation, I ask, why are we increasingly drawn to limits as an analytic and what does this tell us about our situatedness in these conversations and reflexions on critique? In questioning Foucault’s critical project, and Butler’s engagement with its implications for contemporary critical ethical and political philosophy, I come back to the problem of the subject in/of critique and resistance, and thus the problem of governmentality. This particular encounter also enables me to confront the inevitable dangers of psychologisms in practices of critique, and more to the point, in their histories.

Despite, or perhaps because of these contestations with his late works, Foucault’s attempts to move away from an analytic of truth (one possible outcome of the Kantian-Enlightenment tradition) toward a critical, historical ontology of ourselves and our
present provide a productive site to struggle through the logic and mobilization of
critique as an emancipatory practice. It is a struggle of a largely methodological nature,
taking the implicated subjects and effects of critique as a way to work through its
function as a governmentality – that is, as sets of conceptually and historically regulative
ideals. So my concern is with how critique as limit-analysis operates as a form of
governmentality or praxis of the self, to which Foucault (as my interlocutor) seems to be
vulnerable even while attentive to its aporetic manifestations. I therefore hope that this
encounter with Foucault’s struggle with the problematics of order/disorder,
sameness/difference, finitude/infinity, and reason/unreason (notably in his early works) –
within the context of Kantian negotiations of the challenge of immanence/transcendence
– might facilitate our experimenting with our intellectual inheritances in order to clarify
the stakes, strategically and normatively, of a critical political ethos (as expounded in his
later works). Indeed, this is an inquiry into the stakes of our political imaginations. To put
it otherwise, I am asking the question, to what are we now responding? Perhaps herein
lies the overwhelming challenge of the critical project: to give it histories, to politicize its
methods, to engage its subjects, to confront its effects, and to allow its aporias to inform
our methodological orientations.
CHAPTER ONE
An Immanent Transcendence, A Transcendental Immanence: Methodological Reflections on the Aporetic Conditions of Critique as Emancipatory Practice

The Kantian Critical Project: The Challenge of Finitude, Negativity, and Limits

I choose to situate the problematic of critique by considering various challenges that continue to enable/delimit dominant approaches thereto, notably through the logic, mobilizations, and implications of the Kantian inquiry into the conditions of possibility for thought, action, and judgement and the requisite self-reflexivity of knowledge for critical philosophy – and for Enlightenment and modernity, more broadly. I seek not to afford a privileged or exaggerated status to Kantian inheritances nor to establish him as a foundation for a historical reading of our times, but rather as a rich site to think through, in a genealogical vein, some prevalent tensions in contemporary critical theory. I work through this experimental encounter recognizing how Kant struggles to establish the criteria for critical philosophy, against religious dogma and intellectual scepticism, to found a liberatory project based on a legislative reason capable of organizing peaceful and rational societies. Given that “this life is nothing but a mere appearance”, Kant poses three guiding questions in Critique of Pure Reason that continue to inform explorations into critical thought: “What can I know?, What should I do?, What may I hope?” (677). Considering the contentious nature of practices of critique, it is helpful to recall that this claim regarding a disjunction between reality and how we understand reality is not, I argue, a controversial claim; although it has been caricatured by the ‘posty’ debate, it is a long-standing appreciation for the fact that there is no universal experience of reality, not that there is no ontological reality. Marx himself, often evoked against the ‘idealists’ and posties of the ‘left’, recognized this in how he initiates a sort of standpoint analysis that
problematizes bourgeois consciousness as seeking a universality against which the proletariat must resist.

In response to these questions that situate Man in a finitude that he must negotiate via an awareness of limits and a methodological negativity (that disturb yet reify his sovereign subjectivity in making him both subject and object of human inquiry), Kant develops the notion of critique as a method to interrogate the conditions of experience, that is, the appearances of things that we intuit to make sense of the world. Critique, or thinking oriented by reason that questions these limitations, enables us to bring appearances under concepts, which cannot be determined empirically. Thus the particular can only be understood through the universal, for knowledge that is transcendental is occupied not with objects, but with the ways that we can possibly know objects, even prior to experiencing them (CPR 133). It is procedural in that it “demands that reason should take on anew the most difficult of all its tasks, namely, that of self-knowledge, and to institute a court of justice...none other than the critique of pure reason itself” (CPR 101).

Critique thus enables “philosophy [to] consist precisely of knowing its bounds”; however, as empirical observations change over space and time, philosophy and its “concept[s] never remain within secure boundaries” (CPR 637-8). It is thus a sort of possibility not certainty that is at stake, and what we can(not) know is a question of what is lawful in human reason – hence the necessity in Kantian thought to cognize the law, limits, and what is therefore just. Critique in this capacity functions as a self-referential reflexivity toward the self-determination of reason and its subject, epistemologically and historically grounded as a form of resistance. In insisting upon a limit-analysis that
recognizes how knowledge and critique constitute each other (against the “illusory”), this
Kantian project neglects how the very practice of imposing limits or boundaries presumes
that the one drawing these lines can know beyond them in order to be able to situate them
as a limit – and thus they are not limits at all! Determinate ignorance cannot function as
ignorance, in the same ways that limits cannot function contractually through binaries of
the known and the unknown. It is no coincidence that this account of the critical project
reasserts the sovereign subject rather than breaks away at its edges (*CPR* 100).

Nonetheless, the urgency of this problem remains in how contemporary critical thought
struggles with practices of boundaries and limits. Kant captures this concern well in his
*Critique of Pure Reason*:

> But where the *limits* of our possible cognition are very narrow, where the
temptation to judge is great, where the illusion that presents itself is very
deceptive, and where the disadvantage of error is very serious, there the *negative*
in instruction, which serves merely to defend us from errors, is more important
than many a positive teaching by means of which our cognition could be
augmented. (628, italics mine)

These articulations of the limits and nature of knowledge provide a productive site
through which to consider conflictual methodological approaches to critique, and its
implicated subjects. The question of negativity, posed by Kant as a liberatory move away
from dogmatic fixity, becomes crucial to how we can understand his ambivalent appeals
to the transcendental – marked by an anxiety to refuse the transcendental, to not give
authority to the external. In insisting upon, or striving toward, immanence as the
condition of subjectivity, critique assumes the form of self-reflexivity. Herein lies the
inescapable problematic of the critical project: an infinite, solipsistic return to a subject-
centred reason that haunts this recognition of finitude and limits. And every anxious
attempt to go beyond these conditions is an attempt to affirm this modern subjectivity even further – its escapist desires, its anxieties with its finitude, its desires for a better realization of itself as a deferral into the future, and its yearnings to wrench itself into freedom through a struggle with negativity. Every attempt to escape from this existential angst reifies the hold that it has on us, on our subjectivity, whether by trying to evade the subject and its metaphysical questions of truth via structuralist yearnings for the objective or by undertaking hermeneutical endeavours of a humanist or teleological form. Perhaps it is that any effort to give up these escapist desires is existential in and of itself and further reaffirms the liberal imperatives of the free and equal subject, that a turn to ethics becomes so often tied to the critical project – of an anxiety to escape, to free oneself, to disalienate, and to achieve a mastery over oneself and one’s world. Herein lies the slippery logic between the critical and the despotic.

Critique thus carries the baggage of the method to becoming free. Dependent on the knowledge of its conditions, freedom functions as an epistemological practice. The emancipatory element, in the Kantian sense, is that you are free, and through this method, you will realize your freedom in your teleological perfectability – a process also denotative of Marxian struggles against the alienation of Man under capitalism, feminist contestations with patriarchal domination, and postcolonial yearnings for self-determination, among many other emancipatory desires that rely upon a sort of standpoint analysis of a free and originary subject. They all appeal for us to recover our subjectivity, and thus return to the Kantian problematic, as I too am haunted. These approaches to critical theory and praxis tend to privilege exercises of the self on the self as an attempt to reconstruct ourselves by taking our individuated bodies, thoughts, and
desires as the sites of our struggles. These spectres of a liberal, fetishized individual mark these experiences through a displaced figure in its finitude or a God in its centrality. If we reorient our methodological approaches, could we challenge their subjects and socio-political effects? The (non)human in the legitimizing function of the (dis)qualifier for critique cannot serve as our point of entry, whether in the form of a Kantian disciplinarity/maturation, a Foucauldian care of the self against subjectivation, an alienated Man destroyed under capitalism, an alienated Woman violated under patriarchy, or a colonial subject lost to her/his Master. This remains the demand of critique, with its modernizing and developmentalist imperatives in search of a freedom functional only within an immanent self: a freedom that gives form to a dangerous desire to escape from the messiness and complexities of our world in the name of beautiful ideals unattainable in their purity. Moreover, the very notion of critique, of kritik, invokes crisis, which relies upon norm/exception as an organizing principle of its enterprise. By contrasting itself to the dogmatic (in the Kantian sense) through a concern for the conditions and consequences of our modes of thinking, critique demands a particular moral status for the subject, as subjective (dis)qualifier:

We deal with a concept dogmatically…if we consider it as contained under another concept of the object which constitutes a principle of reason and determine it in conformity with this. But we deal with it merely critically if we consider it only in reference to our cognitive faculties and consequently to the subjective conditions of thinking it, without undertaking to decide anything about its object. (Critique of Judgement: Part II 48)

The centrality of the cognitive abilities of the subject, a solipsistic effort to centre Man as subject and object of critique, portends that one can only ever know the world in relation to the self – implicating a Kantian presumption of human finitude, of a
disembodied transcendental subject. These criteria of critical philosophy make it that knowledge is always self-knowledge, and every metaphysics a metaphysics of the self. Indeed, many contemporary endeavours in critical theory get caught in this appeal of immanence: othering is all about the self, the exception about the norm, and other trendy analytics of critical thought and praxis trapped in a philosophy of the subject. This remains the core of immanent logic, mobilized perhaps from an emancipatory desire, but always fixed in a sovereign drive toward mastery, facilitated by a finitude over which one can rule.

In terms of Kant’s critical project, these commitments to an immanent orientation lead him to eschew the empirical while centralizing it, to deny specificity while condemning most everything to it, to objectify the subjective while subjectifying the objective, and so on. Error thus functions as a failure to recognize/impose limits correctly, which requires a sort of hermeneutical sensibility of a truth ‘out there’ yet only ‘in here’: human capacity as the foundation of critical inquiry. It is no surprise how this line of thinking legitimates colonial, patriarchal, racist, classist, and oppressive projects generally in its moralizing developmentalism of critical capacities disguised as the humanist humility of recognizing Man’s limits and finitude. Critique thus necessitates this disciplinarity in the form of self-examination, aimed at resisting the transgression of the limits of our possible experience – a sort of policing, correctional, and juridical mode of inquiry.

In this context, it is possible to discern a striking similarity between how cognitive faculties function as structuring the known or knowable in the Kantian world and how Foucauldian forms of discourse, power/knowledge, and subjectivity function as
structuring limit-experiences or conditions of possibility (to which I return later in this piece). It thus becomes difficult to tease apart the enthusiasm for self-situating with the drive to place the observer as the central mediator of knowledge as the knowing subject. Although the Kantian formulation is not fully mind-dependent in how it necessitates phenomenal conditions of sensibility through rule-based structures of perceptions of a world of objects, it nonetheless reaffirms a sovereign subjectivity. Both of these approaches to the conditions of possibility for critical thought nonetheless seem to get stuck in epistemic games that depend on the structural as finitude and limits.

If the sensational is aesthetic (as opposed to rational) and if experience (constituting the major part of our knowledge) is always phenomenal as in the Kantian project, are the problematics of finitude/infinity, freedom/determinism, and necessity/contingency not always condemned to aporia, that is, never safely contained in their mutual exclusivity? Negativity/positivity as conceptual organizing principles also gets caught in this move, such that neither is possible within the experiential realm in any discrete or harmonious way. Is this perpetual uncertain certainty, maintained by the limits of our finitude, indeed an antidote to scepticism and doubt? These decisions, the drawing of these lines, are always already fixed in the moral realm – of knowing limits, what not to transgress, setting principles – which brings us back to what can I know (a question of human faculties), what should I do (a question of respecting limits), what may I hope (a question of faith and guidance).

These aporias evoke questions of the immanent and the transcendental, as a metaphysics that is always entangled with the divine through deferral. Kantian methods of criticism are particularly concerned with the mediational, the representational, and the
procedural as juridical modes of inquiry, with a pure or transcendental mediation (of non-sensual reason) and an empirical mediation (of sensational intuition) constituting the noumenal and the phenomenal forms of intuition or methods of human inquiry. Yet such a demarcation of the transcendental and the empirical, from which one can renounce (in a Kantian absolute sense) or desire (in a Foucauldian contingent sense) the transgression of limits, always already implicates finitude (whether as a problem of ontology, epistemology, or power) and its corresponding immanent methodological orientations in a sort of political theology. In seeking to resist the starting point of the transcendental, as with the institution of an immanent subject and the Kantian duality of Man, we only end up giving the empirical transcendental value, often through a displacement onto a constituent subjectivity – herein we find the aporias of the logic of immanence/transcendence.

Schmittian Queries: The Logic of Immanence as Political Theology

The aporetic conditions of immanence/transcendence have been powerfully taken up in Schmitt’s politico-legal studies of norm/exception as a problem of the secular and the theological, which has proven to be a rich, contentious site for understanding our methodological orientations of a liberal, Enlightenment bent. In suggesting that modern political thought constitutes merely secularized theological concepts, he urges us to think through “their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts” (PT 36). Through appeals to the secularized divine, such as in the form of the state, the lawgiver, the juristic subject, among other figures, the aporetic conditions of these challenges are evaded through the logical
interjection of God, miracle, or exception as “a mental short circuit”, ripped from the contexts of its implicated movement (PT 39). The theological and the political rely upon legal boundaries and limits, made possible by a metaphysical appeal to the law, natural or normative. These juristic figures establish the limits, boundaries, and borders to found finitude as their condition of possibility (or at least as their legitimizing authority), as a sovereign space of existence that enables, although does not necessarily function, as a mechanical operation of a political theology. These considerations of the secular and the theological enable a powerful critique of liberalism, as embodied in the theory of the democratic state: “Democracy is the expression of a political relativism and a scientific orientation that are liberated from miracles and dogmas and based on human understanding and critical doubt” (PT 42). As an opposition to the irrational, these orientations institute rationality as a way to historically organize “all thought as a function and emanation of vital processes” thereof, which slips into, Schmitt argues, a psychologization (of the conceptual to the sociological) in questioning the motivation of human action (PT 43-4). This move thus gets caught in the same sort of immanent, solipsistic logic developed earlier – whereby methodologically the individual subject/object of analysis logically precedes its context, arriving at a “socio-psychological ‘portrait’”, rather than a historico-political consciousness more broadly situated (PT 45). This “new rationalist spirit” makes it that

[t]here is psychologically (and, from the point of view of a phenomenologist, phenomenologically as well) a complete identity. A continuous thread runs through the metaphysical, political, and sociological conceptions that postulate the sovereign as a personal unit and primeval creator. (PT 47)

The “relativistic and impersonal scientism” of liberal, democratic modes of
thinking, as a transposition of theological anxieties, institutes an uneasy negotiation of the transcendence of the sovereign within a logic of immanence that requires it for its identity and order. However problematic a periodized reading of these tensions may be, Schmitt’s analysis of the legitimizing authority of immanence highlights how these logical (and historical) tensions organize socio-political and metaphysical structures of modernity:

The main line of development will undoubtedly unfold as follows: Conceptions of transcendence will no longer be credible to most educated people, who will settle for either a more or less clear immanence-pantheism or a positivist indifference toward any metaphysics. Insofar as it retains the concept of God, the immanence philosophy, which found its greatest systematic architect in Hegel, draws God into the world and permits law and the state to emanate from the immanence of the objective. But among the most extreme radicals, a consequent atheism began to prevail. The German left-Hegelians were most conscious of this tendency. They were no less vehement than Proudhon in proclaiming that mankind has to be substituted for God. Marx and Engels never failed to recognize that this ideal of an unfolding self-conscious mankind must end in anarchic freedom. Precisely because of his youthful intuition, the utterance of the young Engels in the years of 1842-1844 is of the greatest significance: “The essence of the state, as that of religion, is mankind’s fear of itself”. (PT 50-1)

The “immanence of the objective” necessitates a self-referential logic of self/other relations that yearns to found itself (as a desire, anxiety, knowledge, and politics) upon the interiority of a subject. This sovereign subject and object of all movement and dialectic, of thought, being, and action sets up, in effect, a logic of the positivity of negation and the negativity of the positive. This move is motivated by what Schmitt identifies as two important moments in nineteenth-century Western thought, particularly “the elimination of all theistic and transcendental conceptions and the formation of a new concept of legitimacy” (PT 51). The “metaphysical kernel of all politics” is aptly captured by the decisionist logic of juristic thinking, through which the constitutive power required by any appeal to legitimacy can be established in politics, in theology, in
political theology (*PT* 51). In this context, the ensuing mechanization (or depoliticization) of the political thus requires a topological concern with boundaries and limits within the artificiality of its own finitude as an authorizing mechanism of an immanent governance, mandated to protect Man from Nature, God, and himself.

*Empiricity/Transcendentality as Epistemic Paranoia and Displaced Subjectivities: Exploring Foucault’s *The Order of Things* through the Finitude of Discipline and the Discipline of Finitude*

Both the Schmittian concern for the necessary structuring relations of the socio-political and the metaphysical and the Kantian concern for conditions of possibility grounded in cognitive limits bring our attention to the forms, subjects, and effects of our knowledge systems. Concerned with these questions of knowledge (especially on its effects of power), Foucault’s methodological struggles – broadly situated within structural, hermeneutical, and phenomenological tensions/inheritances – pose some important problems to what we can know, how we can know, and corresponding ethico-political questions that inform any appeal to a critical practice. Foucault’s attempts to grapple with the complex dynamics of social exclusion/inclusion and accompanying moral, political, scientific, cultural, and philosophical modes of power lead him to inquire into various forms of rationality, from the histories of modern science to madness itself.

I thus set Foucault’s *The Order of Things* (through the problematic of sameness) and *History of Madness* (through the problematic of difference) to get at the logic of immanence/transcendence that gives form to the Kantian problem of knowledge, grounded in the duality of Man, and the ensuing function of critique in these traditions. I
first consider the problematic of sameness – with its organizing ideals of structure, order, representation, discourse, finitude, and empiricity – through The Order of Things, primarily concerned with how its methodological implications are trapped within the aporias of the immanent and the transcendental as previously developed. I then engage the related problematic of difference through History of Madness to consider how questions of limits, ruptures, exclusions, margins, frontiers, disorder, and unreason implicate such methodologies through their claims on historicity, morality, metaphysics, epistemology, desire, alienation, truth, and freedom.

In this context, I read Foucault as a productive site to think through various methodological contestations within Western thought, notably as concerned with the starting point of the subject in philosophical inquiry, against which strategic reorientations toward relationality have taken shape, be it relations of governance or power, the intersubjective, the collective, the structural, or so on. Foucault ventures into these problematics by asking, “what if empirical knowledge, at a given time and in a given culture, did possess a well-defined regularity?” – that is, “laws of a certain code of knowledge” (OT ix). The problem of laws and structural necessities – whether in a Hegelian-Marxian movement of history, a Schmittian concern for order through the juridically regulative ideals of norm/exception, or a Kantian negotiation of finitude through legislative reason – evokes for Foucault a rethinking of the relationship between philosophy or critique (as an inquiry) and knowledge (as principles of sorts). He approaches these questions by setting various epistemological figures and spaces, representational practices, and the “positive unconscious of knowledge” as the site of his analysis – an orientation that I problematize later in this text in terms of models of
epistemic paranoia (OT xi). Concerned with these relations of the procedural and the cumulative, Foucault works through a “comparative” approach to get at the problem of change (as reorganization through historicity), of causality (as forced solution/justification through a teleological rather than a descriptive approach), and of the subject (as figures whose functions, situations, capacities, and possibilities are always already subject to discursive conditions). Through these orientations, he seeks “to explore scientific discourses not from the point of view of the individuals who are speaking, nor from the point of view of the formal structures of what they are saying, but from the point of view of the rules that come into play in the very existence of such discourse...” (OT xiv).

These methodological concerns express some of the major problematics that I am attempting to address here: how so much of Western philosophy is haunted by the problem of the subject, as an implicit/explicit desire for transcendental consciousness. Foucault captures these tensions in his methodological rejection of phenomenological approaches, struggling against the sovereignty of the subject (and its forms of subject/object relations) in how it ascribes “absolute priority to the observing subject, which attributes a constituent role to an act, which places its own point of view at the origin of all historicity – which, in short, leads to a transcendental consciousness” (OT xiv). This move to resist the sovereign subject of modernity poses the challenge of historicity as a methodological orientation concerned with historical problems of thought, rather than with phenomenological problems of consciousness; to put it otherwise, it proposes a history of the conditions of possibility of history, not as pure contingency or repetition, but as meaningful. For a history or a knowledge of sorts to be meaningful in
the Foucauldian sense, a form of functionalism emerges in order to make sense of how this history is experienced, or its intelligibility through “the terms in which it thought of itself”. In this attempt to resist necessary or reductionist structural calculations, he asks us to relinquish the accompanying teleologies of progress, because “[o]nly then can we discern the overall structures that carry the forms of experience in an indefinite movement, open only onto the continuity of its own prolongation, and which nothing, not even our age, can stop it” (HM 82, 425). Refusing transcendental subjectivities (of a phenomenological sort), Foucault seeks to understand the historical configurations of practices, beliefs, and institutions as discursive practices and events, rather than reducing them to a (Derridean) textualization closed into the interiority of the sovereign interpreter (HM xxiii, 577, 590). In striving not toward “a theory of the knowing subject, but rather to a theory of discursive practice”, Foucault’s work becomes a rich site through which to consider our intellectual inheritances by way of their methodological tensions, from his structuralist affinities, however rejected, to his phenomenological contestations (a struggle clearly located in History of Madness).

More specifically, Foucault’s comparative approach to examining (ir)regularities in modern scientific thought, as elaborated in The Order of Things, provides one way to think through these problems. The ways in which Foucault sets a relative, against an absolute, orientation is exemplary of how the immanence/transcendence problem takes hold yet again, as if relativity could free us from the transcendental demands and desires of a modern subjectivity (or perhaps more to the point, from the impossibility of Man’s subjectivity and objectivity in the Kantian sense). The relative, finite, and immanent thus serve as the means to combat the absolute, infinite, and transcendentally sovereign
categories to which Kant so often succumbs. Yet I propose that we question what is at stake in this move by considering how Foucault seems to confront these methodological struggles in ways that do not altogether appreciate the hold of these aporias, particularly in deploying oppositional or resistant analytics. In response to these challenges, I argue here that these efforts to contain the transcendental through the immanent only make it that immanence functions as a desire to escape from the transcendental and hence is transcendental itself in playing the divine role of imposing limits on/of the human, such as with the Schmittian concern for the (denial of the) metaphysical transposition of immanent objectivity, that is, for “a positivist indifference” (PT 50-1). Although limits may be motivated by arbitrary recognitions of particularity, the somewhat obvious point that I am proposing here is that they are condemned to always function as a lack, a yearning, a loss in the face of the transcendental. As authorizations of division or implications of finitude, they signify a beginning and an end. To claim, as Foucault does, that in every culture “man does not begin with freedom, but with limits and the line that cannot be crossed” is consequently no less an existential appeal to the infinite than the presumption of natural liberty and infinite becoming (HM 544).

These methodological implications of an immanent orientation play into the structural paranoia of much of critical philosophy. We may well discern these tensions in how Foucault begins The Order of Things with an analysis of Diego Velázquez’s painting Las Meninas and its complex arrangements of sight-lines, appearance, and hiddenness (refer to appendix one). In the context of the aporetic relations of absence/presence (or, the problem of the constitutive outside), Foucault draws our attention to the simulacral nature of representational practices that make up interpretative projects, notably through
the attempt to discover the hidden. This formative search for exposure organizes the field of analysis through signs or representations of a pre-existing intelligent design, as if God’s marks on earth reveal “its inner secrets” (*OT* 33). Thus to interpret (as part of critique) implies something already given, and as Foucault argues in working through the logic of immanence, the divine and the erudite both constitute the same hermeneutics, “coeval with the institution of God”, by animating infinite interventions between observation and accepted authority, marks and words – always already a knowledge of God through negation, or, of the transcendental through the immanent (*OT* 34).

Foucault’s analysis of the position of the double sovereign (in the case of the painting occupied by the viewer and the represented figures) asks us to consider its centrality in organizing representational practices. That is, he is asking us to engage aporias of subjectivity/objectivity as representations of representations, and so blurs the distinctive functions of reality/appearance as analytics. What I would like us to consider now is how this form of self-consciousness, grounded in the sort of resignation of authenticity captured by the challenges that this painting poses to its subjects/objects, plays into the very dictates that it seeks to resist. And in doing so, this certainty about our uncertainty, secured through an acceptance of artificiality, produces not the desired effect of a humbling liberation from our ignorance, but rather an intensification of what I am referring to as practices of an *epistemic paranoia*. It is precisely this history of critique with which I seek to grapple here.

The paranoid orientation that I am proposing through the epistemic politics of critique is one that mechanistically seeks and orders knowledge in temporalized terms through the futuristic anticipations of and protections from error and untruths. Through a
defensive and anxious self-reflexivity of a mimetic form, it defers to visual technologies of exposure in order to detect hidden violences, origins, and principles. The ensuing epistemic centring of doubt, of the sort of a Cartesian sceptical subject or a Kantian subject/object, allows the accompanying fears of uncertainty to dominate the subjects’ relation to and schematization of ‘reality’ through suspicion and mistrust, otherwise construed as a threat to one’s subjectivity in the world. Hence the persecution of the incarcerated modern subject imposes itself onto our political imaginations, born from the displacements, injuries, and vulnerabilities of modern immanence and finitude. These systematized concerns for and scepticism of ‘reality’, motivated by excessive anxieties and fears of untruth, place (ir)rationality at stake in the interactions of its subjects. This structural paranoia seeks to access true knowledge by vigilantly setting (il)legitimate standards of truth, reason, and other such iterations or resistant discoveries.

This mode of seeking, finding, and organizing knowledge, these rituals and performances of a paranoid form, does not necessarily require us to submit to a diagnostic, medicalized analysis, for the drive to figure out ‘reality’ can assume varied relations to its conditions of possibilities through the meaning and function of its practices. The irony of condition and identity in affirming the legitimate status of knowledge and the knower, however, are telling of its meditational function as an ascetic love for, yet in sparse conversation with, the objects of its knowledge. Resonant with a Foucauldian ordering-of-things that strives to ascribe intelligibility or narratibility to the previously disordered, silent, marginal, or hidden, to (re)capture the exceptional within the norm, such an explanatory framework subsumes intentionality in a detection of the hidden to offer a vindication of an incarcerated truth. The rigid temporal narratives of this
efficacious form of knowledge, motivated through exposure to triumphantly demystify ourselves and our world, ultimately fears the humiliations of untruth – of the acritical or dogmatic appropriation of truth.

In this context, it may be helpful to question how the methodological function of suspicion, operationalized through its epistemological tendencies of exposure, necessitates an imagined hiddeness that invokes the transcendental or theological in its hermeneutical efforts to reconcile contradictions, to uncover the truth of artificiality/representation/performance, to disentangle cause/effect, and to determine universal solutions therefrom. The discovery of beyond or beneath projects itself from the spatiotemporal narratives of telos and origin through the ontological quest for truth – a practice of finding object-ivity, otherwise concealed from human view (by Nature, God, or Artifice) through a hermeneutics of suspicion. Although Foucault is cautious not to play into an originary discovery, he slips into organizing marginal experiences, such as madness, through the spatiotemporality of beyond/beneath in his self-ascribed methodology of “the archaeology of that silence” wrapped up in the divisions of madness and reason and “the dialogue of their rupture” (HM xxviii, italics mine).

Through this concern to locate a “caesura” in which marginality can take place, in which silence becomes audible, we confront the problem of limits as negativity, constituting forms of rejection, exclusion, and exception through transcendental appeals to the positivity of foundation, security, and reason (HM xxviii). Limits thus function through a politics of rupture, “a tear” that imposes a prior linearity, telos, non-rupture, or norm against which something tears (HM xxix). As such, the analytics of rupture, exceptionalism, margins, and so on, have become dangerous fetishes in critical theory,
and Foucault at times slips into privileging these moves, notably through his conceptions of historicity. This methodological point that I am teasing apart here does not require us to then approach problems of historicity as either continuities or contingencies, but rather to question what other conceptual strategies may be available that are not as obsessed with the purity of a norm, the time before. Perhaps the challenge lies in trying to understand these moves as not regulated by their corresponding binaries of continuity/rupture, centre/margin, and norm/exception? Not as ruptures, but as negotiations. Could we make sense of history through this methodological orientation or does it require a different function of historicity altogether? Even objectification, of a modern sort with which Foucault is concerned, is not a silencing of all that at some pre-existing temporal moment was not an object (such as the madman). It is not a sudden change in the constitution of the person, the relationship, or the institution – it is a constant process of negotiation, which objectification can never silence, even if only murmurs can be heard by those who strain to listen. Form as such can never be divorced from substance, but even form itself necessitates, and cannot impose its tyrannical hold on, effect. Perhaps this points to a simple distinction between how such an experience as madness is posited and how it functions, but it seems that these two implicate each other in necessary relationships, at least in mobilizations of the problems. Nonetheless, attempts to counteract the paranoia of a silence, a monologue, a rupture, a frontier, or even a non-discursivity potentially lead to an archaeology of discourse that presents its own challenges as the antidote. Nonetheless, the concern for what knowledge is rather than does in these paranoid tendencies, entangled in the epistemic demands of truth, gets at an implicit desire for order and mastery. Perhaps the orientation of mobilization as
opposed to a more formal logic could renegotiate these metaphysics – something to which I seek to remain attentive throughout these explorations.

The significance of this methodological reorientation lies in how the problematic of order, as invoked by Foucault, remains bound to finitude as discipline and discipline as finitude in ways that elide how order operates as much as a function of a paranoid schematic as disorder. Both lament a lack, as oppositional constituents of the problematic logic of fullness and perfection, as anxieties motivated by the same structural demands. Foucault himself slips into these tendencies, however much he attempts to complicate their mobilizations, by claiming that, for instance,

[op]er is, at one and the same time, that which is given in things as their inner law, the hidden network that determines the way they confront one another, and also that which has no existence except in the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language; and it is only in the blank spaces of this grid that order manifests itself in depth as though already there, waiting in silence for the moment of its expression. (OT xx, italics mine)

But for whom is it silent and hidden? Order as an organizing principle, anxiety, desire, politics, or ethos privileges a fear of contingency as much as disorder defers its own constitutive fears – both mediated through claims to positivity/negativity via sameness/difference. In a finitude indebted to the logic of resemblance, the self or the same (or self-same) always already appeals to an other who is “at once interior and foreign” and thus constitutes limit-experiences by imposing limits upon themselves, limits that are closed upon themselves (OT 31). Although Foucault discusses order as a mode of being and experience – that is, in terms of how it is recognized/posited through space and time to create the positive basis of knowledge – his concern with the episteme upon which knowledge grounds itself in positivity feeds into this desire for a rediscovery,
for the conditions of possibility that flirt with an immanent transcendence. This complicity is particularly poignant in how he seeks to understand how the “space of order” or the “space of knowledge” is constituted, thus requiring a topological/geometrical mapping of an imaginary experience or “positive unconscious” (OT 219). Indeed, a strange privileging of space as the sphere of knowledge, experience, desire, and in general activity pervades much of how he sets up these problems of Man’s empirico-transcendentality in The Order of Things, even if spatiality is deployed not so much as metaphors but as techniques and objects of analysis. Does the temporal approximate the transcendental move, locked in an infinite future/past of a theological source? Does the finitude of space, transposed onto territorial form, secure (in our desires) relativity and boundaries in a more lucid way, and so assuage our anxieties of the forbidden, the hidden, the silent, and the prohibited of becoming (HM 86)? Whether this necessarily imposes an atemporal grid or a form of intersectionality of spatiotemporal conditions of possibility onto Foucault’s analyses remains ambiguous, yet perhaps could serve as a series of productive questions to pose to his work.

This is to say that the implicated political ethos of these spatiotemporal analytics reifies a particular logic of sameness/difference that problematically aligns binaric constituents all too neatly – imbuing order with a sameness of coherence, regularity, and continuity, while it is just as possible to make sense of the representational demands of difference, discontinuity, and disorder through order as through disorder. What then are we to make of Foucault’s analysis of the experience/mode of order grounded in his claim that “only continuity can guarantee that nature repeats itself and that structure can, in consequence, become character” (OT 147). To qualify as a science, a body of knowledge
must then comprise a “continuous network of beings”, a sort of spatial organization, although he proposes that we understand change as arbitrary distinctions in a “constantly mobile whole” (*OT* 149, 50). These formative distinctions in Foucault’s thought exemplify how the organizing principle of norm/exception informs the political projects of order/disorder via utopias/heterotopias, as if a pre-existing order and disorder animate our experiences, rather than simply a question of their mobilizations:

*Utopias* afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold; they open up cities with vast avenues, superbly planted gardens, countries where life is easy, even though the road to them is chimerical. *Heterotopias* are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter or tangle common names....This is why utopias permit fables and discourse: they run with the very grain of language and are part of the fundamental dimension of the *fabula*; heterotopias...desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences. (*OT* xviii)

However much Foucault’s archaeological analysis proscribes order as observed arrangements in which we can examine “each event in term of its own arrangement” rather than as a function of harmony, it also gets trapped (inevitably so) in this logic of immanence, with its accompanying analytics (*OT* 218). If order then functions as “a framework for acquired knowledge...the space in which every being approached man’s consciousness”, are all other organizing frameworks (for instance, conceptually of madness or politically of heterotopia) condemned to unintelligibility, as if the sameness of finitude and immanence were more orderly and intelligible than difference (*OT* 219)? This presumption that seemingly informs a Foucauldian archaeology designates history as “the fundamental mode of being of empiricities...in the space of knowledge”, as an *a priori* condition of possibility, or, less metaphysically, of intelligibility (*OT* 219).
Governed by *epistemes* that change in “major and relatively sudden shifts”, this temporized logic of order (if nothing more) raises the question of how to distinguish between historicity and temporality methodologically (*OT* xii). In effect, Foucault’s attempt to understand an experience “before it was captured by knowledge” slips into seeking an originary, prediscurisve, and pre-subjectified space prior to systems of classifications, setting up a problematic linearity of experience (*HM* xxxii). Although divisions are not absolute, permanent, universal, atempoaral, or ahistorical, what are the effects of placing as our point of departure the necessary temporal logic of change, which seeks to understand “an undifferentiated experience, the still undivided experience of the division itself”, as Foucault proposes (*HM* xxxii)? Could this lead us to differentiating between temporality (as form) and historicity (as experience) in their methodological functions? The latter, as Foucault indeed demonstrates, becomes a condition of possibility for us to make sense of our present and inheritances via experimentations within histories of the present, but must this orientation function through a temporality of past/present/future?

Of course, Foucault’s method remains vulnerable to historical generalizations: totalizing narratives of a unique present or epoch, a mobilization of history through identity, the problem of newness, the reification of agents (historical and otherwise), an anachronistic imposition of contemporary knowledge onto past subjects/knowledges, and a framing of the history of the present as a telos toward which to direct our historical readings. In negotiating these challenges, he insists that “to draw a dividing-line”, to establish discontinuities, is already subject to the fact that “any limit we set may perhaps be no more than an arbitrary division made in constantly mobile whole” (*OT* 50). But
how might we understand the function and stakes of these limits?

The presumed security of order (guarded by its claims to sameness, immanence, and finitude) makes it that the function of historicity in Foucault’s analyses assumes a problematic temporality, anxious to contain the transcendental via an immanence that requires a past/present/future in order not to slip into the disorders of infinity and difference. Against these self-imposed limits, the desire for emancipation emerges as a quest to emancipate ourselves from the artificiality of representation. Although Foucault traces the dilemmas of a representational mode of being, such as in his historical readings of the classical age in which a mode of being subject and object reworks the logic of representation into one of self-reflexivity, he effectively reanimates these problems of a self-reflexive subject in his own implicit recovering of a freedom located within our limits and finitude (*OT* 210).

Perhaps one way to account for these implications of immanence lies in his privileging of the epistemic (of a linguistic sort) in his structural methodologies. In describing “discourse [as] merely representation itself represented by verbal signs”, Foucault reinstitutes a logocentric model of discourse, which inevitably pushes representational practices into a subject/object bind (*OT* 81). However much the linguistic offers a structural consideration of conditions of possibility, it also privileges epistemologically expressive functions, which its discursive transposition cannot evade (*OT* 237). From similitude to difference, from representation to reflexivity, from God’s image to Man’s image, from the infinite to the finite, and from an opaque transcendence to a transparent immanence, “Man is invented, half empirical, half philosophical, an anthropology in accordance with a new form of knowledge” (*OT* 46, 55). However much
I may be disrespecting his historical readings of different ages, systems, and cultures, I mobilize these logical possibilities to think through our inheritances as complex negotiations that need not be temporalized as periods, but might be understood through a historicity of absence/presence, or otherwise put, a historicity of negotiation not contained by a linearity that dictates the temporal experiences of a past/present/future. At the very least, these reflections on the function of history in our methodologies provide a productive site to think through the implications of immanence/transcendence as formative games of logic in these traditions, caught within the aporias of Man’s empirico-transcendentality.

Foucault’s analysis of the modern experience of Man as subject and object poses a telling historical problem (within which he is caught, and perhaps that is all that I am bringing out in my reading of his analyses): “behind the history of the positivities, there appears another, more radical, history, that of man himself – a history that now concerns man’s very being, since he now realizes that he not only ‘has history’ all around him, but is himself, in his own historicity, that by means of which a history...[is] given form” (OT 370). Thus history serves as the foundation for Man, as “a finitude without infinity is no doubt a finitude that has never finished” (OT 372). However, Man’s positivity as the foundation for knowledge is limited by his historical positivity as the knowing subject, caught in perspectivity in how “the moment of finitude is dissolved in the play of a relativity from which it cannot escape” (OT 372). Historicism as such implies a certain philosophy or at least a certain methodology (and hermeneutics) for Foucault. Although Man may be “new”, various manifestations of solipsistic logic pervade numerous traditions, locked in our inheritances. I am thus not attempting to point out ‘errors’ in
Foucault’s work, but rather am allowing his work to provoke certain aporias, which he is often sensitive to and negotiates in significant ways.

These aporias pose an important challenge to critical philosophy, which Foucault identifies with the Kantian challenge of limits, negativity, and finitude. He brings out how the Kantian concern with “the relations of representation to each other”, which seeks to “avoid” representation by establishing the conditions that define its universally valid form, challenges the self-referentiality of ideology that “situates all knowledge in the space of representation, and by scanning that space it formulates the knowledge of laws that provide its organization” (OT 241). In contrast, Foucault notes how in accordance with the logic of immanence that questions foundations, limits, and representations, Kantian critique also “marks the threshold of our modernity; it questions representation, not in accordance with the endless movement that proceeds from the simple element to all its possible combinations, but on the basis of its rightful limits....[sanctioning] the withdrawal of knowledge and thought outside the space of representation” (OT 242).

Therefore, this mode of reflection emerges through “knowledge [that] cannot be deployed any longer against a background of a unified and unifying mathesis” (OT 247). In this context, Man in his finitude assumes a transcendental formalism with a regulated relationship to empiricity as his reflexivity – an important caveat, I would like to suggest, for designating the value and function of critique along such binaric exclusivities. Foucault proposes that we understand the implications of such a modern subjectivity/objectivity through, for example, a Kantian reduction to transcendental subjectivity as the basis/method for all possible formalism, or even through a more Hegelian dialectic/phenomenology through which “the totality of the empirical domain
was taken back into the interior of a consciousness...as an empirical and a transcendental field simultaneously” (OT 247-8). So how might we respond to these tensions of Man’s empirico-transcendentality in Foucault’s own thought, particularly as constitutive of a critical project and its self-reflexivity?

Foucault further describes (and in a way, exemplifies) this modern approach to critical philosophy through its conception of Man, who yearns to neutralize, as the knowing subject, language and its methods of understanding, striving to constitute a procedural epistemology rather than a metaphysical relationship to truth or knowledge. This method, with its somewhat utilitarian appeals to formalization and interpretation, makes it that “[p]hilology, as the analysis of what is said in the depths of discourse, has become the modern form of criticism” (OT 298). This “epistemological consciousness of man”, whose historical distinction as a modern form is tenuous, sets up an analytic of finitude by way of this cogito, and so

man appears in his ambiguous position as an object of knowledge and as a subject that knows: enslaved sovereign, observed spectator...[as] the particular arrangement of the episteme that justifies it, the new relations that is established by means of it between words, things, and their order. (OT 309, 312)

With representation assuming a subordinate function in this logic, Man’s finitude enables “a positivity of knowledge” to found itself, yearning to defer the negativity that methodologically founds its positivity while it “promises the very infinity it refuses” (OT 313, 314). This “purified essence of positivity”, marked upon the presupposed finitude of the body as spatiality, secures existentially determined boundaries and limits through identity/difference (OT 314). This inevitable trap of immanence is grounded in how finitude functions as a resistance to metaphysics:
Hence the interminable to and fro of a double system of reference: if man’s knowledge is finite, it is because he is trapped, without possibility of liberation, within the positive contents of language, labour, and life; and inversely, if life, labour, and language may be posited in their positivity, it is because knowledge has finite forms. (OT 316)

Through this “empirico-transcendental doublet”, Man becomes the foundation for knowledge – its truths and limits (OT 322, 341). The legacy of the critical project thus remains as this (dis)placement of Man/God, something Foucault reifies in resistance: a positivity founded in negativity. Kant was thus also asking, “what is Man?”, seeking “an ontology without metaphysics”, struggling at the threshold of the empirical and the transcendental with Man “as the immediate and sovereign transparency of a cogito” (OT 340-1). This perpetual call toward self-knowledge leads to a solipsistic logic of critique in the form of an obsessively paranoid epistemic practice, as I argue here through this reading of Foucault that brings Foucault’s own analyses of such Enlightenment imperatives into confrontation with his critical methodologies.

Given this (dis)placement of the question of transcendence, contemporary critical thought could not avoid reviving the analytic of the cogito, whose paranoia lies in (not) affirming being through its own negation, through doubt, questioning, and critique that call for the ideal of a sovereign, self-transparent subject (OT 324). Foucault’s analysis of modern (ir)rationalities gestures at how this sort of paranoia intensifies through how “modern thought is imbued with the necessity of thinking the unthought [a Christian legacy, perhaps] – of reflecting the contents of the In-itself in the form of the For-itself, of ending man’s alienation by reconciling him with his own essence, of making explicit the horizon that provides experience with its background of immediate and disarmed proof, of lifting the veil of the Unconscious, of becoming absorbed in its silence, or of straining
to catch its endless murmur” (*OT* 327). Given these tensions of the Kantian duality of Man, what I am proposing here is that critique – as exemplified by Foucault’s self-conscious critical project that seeks to organize “a positive unconscious of knowledge” via discourses of order/disorder, sameness/difference, and limits/ruptures – functions as a method to this “ontology of the unthought”, a reflexive knowledge seeking to apprehend the unthought and make impossible a morality (while assuming a hypermorality) in creating its own historicity (*OT* xi, 326). Foucault’s mobilization of a critique of reason brings out, in complex ways, the dictates of the modern subjectivity/objectivity that he seeks to trouble, and thus well captures the aporias of the critical project inherited through Man’s empirico-transcendentalty:

We know, in any case, that all efforts to think afresh are in fact directed at that obstacle: whether it is a matter of crossing the anthropological field, tearing ourselves free from it with the help of what it expresses, and rediscovering a purified ontology or a radical thought of being; or whether, rejecting not only psychologism and historicism, but all concrete forms of the anthropological prejudice, we attempt to question afresh the limits of thought, and to renew contact in this way with the project for a general critique of reason. (*OT* 342)

*Epistemologies of Morality, Moralities of Truth: Freedom, Alienation, Desire, and (Un)Reason as Technologies of Critique in Foucault’s History of Madness*

The analytic of Man and his doubles that Foucault develops via modern (ir)rationalities, I propose, gives form to critique as the self-reflexivity of a sovereign, self-transparent, knowing subject, notably in how the critical is intrinsically bound with the logic of (un)reason as an organizing principle of its limits, functions, subjects, and effects. In *History of Madness*, Foucault works through related methodological contestations via historical mobilizations of madness and (un)reason as socio-political
modes of organization grounded in the historical problems of limits, ruptures, exclusions, prohibitions, margins, frontiers, (dis)orders, and finitude (from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to classical and modern Europe). However vulnerable to historical totalizations, his analyses offer some helpful approaches to some formative problems of Western intellectual inheritances, and what it might mean to do critique therein, particularly by setting madness as a nodal point through which to understand how our claims to knowledge are regulated by (un)reason. I thus set these explorations as a site for thinking through what is implicated in critique as a rational practice – that is, how the relationship of critique and (un)reason is caught up in various moves, from the logic of immanence/transcendence, the metaphysics of morality and epistemology, and the politics of truth, to the humanist subject of reason with its desires, (dis)qualifications, and emancipatory aspirations.

Foucault insists that we think of madness not as an aberration locked in the binary of norm/exception, but as a particular constitution of the regulative ideals of (un)reason and their accompanying imperatives of truth, ethics, and subjectivity. He thus sets out to oppose “the gesture of sovereign reason” that banishes, excludes, and expels madness from its realm (HM xxvii). By analyzing numerous conflicting figures of unreason and madness, Foucault’s study provokes various questions regarding the nature and function of reason that could be useful for thinking through its hold on critical thought today. Although historically differentiated (in his analyses), the structure of madness (as represented through various figures) gets at an inaccessible purity of subjectivity: both purified and chaotic (with respect to the social world), immanent and divine, a source of knowledge/inspiration and an apocalyptic limit-experience, enlightening and obscuring, a
truth (as Man’s mirror) and an error (as fault and contradiction), hypersocial (as excess) and asocial (as prediscursive exception), immediate and mediate, representative of Man and of animal, creative and destructive, guilty (via intentionality) and innocent (via destiny), a gift/virtue and a weakness/vice, universal and particular, cosmic (as prophetic, primitive, secretive) and earthly (as humanistically didactic of faults in the human character), ultimate happiness and ultimate punishment...among other contradictory figures that it has assumed throughout various historical experiences. These tensions aptly capture, I argue here, some notable aporias of (un)reason, more than the historical characterizations of certain experiences of madness that Foucault provides, however much it may not be necessary to dismiss fully his historical generalizations, abstractions, and totalizations. What I take from this (at least for my purposes here) is how these figures and experiences of (un)reason inform the problem of truth, how we can(not) access it, in what figures/subjects, and through what regimes of power or conditions of possibility. Herein I situate a locus for critique.

These appropriations of the figures of madness and unreason also get at the humanist obsession with the problem of who or what is Man, against which an alienated, feigned, or divine essence makes up our appearances. The limits of our reason, relative to God’s or other (secularized) theological figures, lay at the heart of the Kantian problematic of critique that sets our legacies of finitude (powerfully exemplified by The Fall, as Foucault develops). Whether in Foucault’s terms of a Renaissance concern with the divine and the limits of our humanity; or a classical dialectic of reason/unreason that must be confined, contained, and punished from within; or a modern loss of an originary, natural freedom in need of cure and protection as the object of a medicalized gaze, these
questions of (un)reason demand a negotiation of the profane and the divine, or the secular and the theological, through the logic of immanence/transcendence that gets at certain productive desires and fears. These formative claims to unreason as alienation from an essential self, against itself, arouse a yearning toward mastery and self-transparency denotative of modern (ir)rationality.

As constituent of alienation, madness (or, perhaps truth and unreason) functions as a moral critique, in how Foucault proposes that denouncing its blindness reaffirms our return to truth (HM 13). Morality, as such, resides within the realm of the theological as determining the sacred limits of good and evil through an implicit juridical model (HM 448). This move seems to depend upon a metaphysics of epistemology, which demands that we know good/evil, whereby evil becomes a fault and object of moral criticism (a lack of self-control or self-transparency of knowledge) and justice an unveiling of truth (via critique). As a limit-experience in “a moral universe”, madness makes sense of the Kantian imperative of freedom and maturation via “how in men ruled by their desires the soul became a prisoner of the beast” – that is, via the passivity of passion (HM 18). This brings about what Foucault cites as a “paroxysm of perfection”, a violent demand of a moral person mediated by inclusions/exclusions into this moral universe (HM 429).

Even through a dialectical struggle of reason/unreason that seeks to complicate the sovereign, given, and fixed movement of a world set in the eyes of God, the theological character of our finitude always already necessitates an infinite. The dialectic, in effect, requires a journey toward some telos (toward God and infinite mastery?) via contradictions in truth and Man’s weaknesses – a dialectic of truth as a struggle with reality/appearance that Foucault elaborates in terms of the shortcomings of Man’s reason
relative to God’s (HM 30). Given the unstable interplay of norm/exception in the
dialectic, redemption must be mutual, and the worst kind of madness, Foucault argues, is
the unrecognized form; emancipation can never be without enslavement. In this way, a
politics or analytics of finitude demands that we recognize our confinement as such – that
we recognize its accompanying madness and misery (through a sort of Kantian critique)
so that we can better control our senses. There must be a recognition of the artificiality of
the world (in a Kantian or Cartesian way) in order for reason to work; consequently, as I
argue here, it takes on the form of a paranoid schematic through a self-conscious mastery
struggling against an uncontained madness. What does this mean for the nominalism of
critical theory and its commitments to finitude and artificiality? That is, what does this
mean for how critique replicates these moves that it seeks to resist? Reason thus
seemingly functions to contain/regulate an imposition of finitude, to enable the self-
consciousnesses/reflexivity/governance of critique. Herein we can locate the form of
madness immanent within reason, its doubling, or otherwise put, how immanence
becomes a means to transcendence (HM 35). Through the moralizing dimension of these
claims to finitude, a politics or ethos of forgiveness emerges in a working over of the
immanent and the transcendental, a performance of illusion until truth (HM 40).

Caught within the dictates of immanence/transcendence, the body as a primordial
site of unreason assumes a productive role in these (dis)qualifiers of subjectivity. Given
the dominant conviction of the convergence between “the sins of the flesh and the faults
committed against reason” (which Foucault comments on particularly with respect to the
classical age), an aesthetic of knowledge develops through positivist or objectivist
epistemologies that necessitate particular subject/object relations via a series of (visual)
technologies that privilege the observational in setting the “madman” as the object for the “eyes of reasonable reason” (*HM* 487). The body is thus reduced to an *a priori*, ahistorical object of the rational gaze. The resultant biopolitical nature of positivist knowledge further constitutes madness as an epistemological problem in terms of the proper use of reason – moralized in how *(in)corrigible* these figures present themselves to be in the context of the redemption of “the imaginary geometry of its morality” (*HM* 81). An epistemology of morality, or a morality of truth, thus becomes intrinsically bound with questions of (un)reason – madness, particularly, then functions as a “psychological effect of a moral fault” (*HM* 296). The presumed instrumentality of the body (as merely a sensory vessel) brings up questions of how the corporeal space, seen as unified, is often understood through discourses of immanence/transcendence that prescribe the body as locked in its immanence, as the register of desire that obstructs the path to the transcendental (*HM* 286). However, by serving as a space (enclosed in Foucault’s *geometry* of morality), how does this spatialized experience of the body deny its flux and movement?

Cartesian sceptical philosophy, regulated by its “economy of doubt”, negotiates these desires for sovereign mastery (through questions of the mind and the body) with a certainty in the form of scepticism and doubt (*HM* 45). Indeed, to claim anything as false (which the Cartesian model attempts to do) is to claim to know the limits and frontiers of God or Nature’s knowledge, intent, and power (*HM* 46). The presumption of doubt thus necessitates a sovereign subjectivity (whether Cartesian, Kantian, or otherwise) as the “secure foundation of transcendental consciousness” from which to draw the lines between doubt/certainty, empirical/transcendental, among other regulative ideals of truth,
fullness and perfection. Yet, as Foucault notes in various figures of madness, “a new sovereign rules a domain where the only possible enemies are errors and illusions”, complicating the (dis)qualifiers of subjectivity: “[w]hile man can still go mad, thought, as the sovereign exercise carried out by a subject seeking the truth, can no longer be devoid of reason” (HM 47). In this context, Marx’s objections to the (bourgeois) subject positions demanded by these philosophical approaches take force.

Indeed, this is a question of subjectivity. Other figures such as the poor, unemployed, criminal, and insane, Foucault develops, are entangled in complicated networks of their claims to truth, salvation, progress, and liberation (HM 47). They rely upon particular discourses of governance as a humanist institution (as “a body of the people”) juxtaposed to the animality of the non-governed realm (HM 62). This, of course, means that they require certain kinds of (non)humans to make possible these systems, discourses, and cultures. In addressing madness via “instruments of order”, particularly in the classical age, Foucault describes how we can understand these problems “at the limits of legality”: “half-way between police and justice”, at the threshold of punishment and charity (HM 49). The corresponding (Protestant) work ethic, and its paternal authority, animates this “crime against public order” through the convergence of civic and moral duties that enables “[not] a dialectic of humiliation and glorification but rather of the relationship of disorder to order…now locked in guilt” (HM 59). This morality/politics of guilt inspires a relationship of the self to the self definitive of virtuous activity (and perhaps of critique as its instrument): one can be a good or a bad guilty person, depending on how one works toward salvation and its truth. Herein lay justifications for protecting/depriving freedom in terms of how one uses it, as if it were of merely
utilitarian value, an instrumental neutral medium (HM 365). Through guilt, assistance is freedom, a struggle against the alienated truth of unreason and idleness – restraining and organizing freedom, but never abolishing its existentiality: a Kantian freedom, in fact, at the convergence between the limits of liberty and reason. This primacy of the “moral subjects” situates freedom within “an ethical exercise and moral guarantees” grounded in a “social immanence” against the “slavery of sin” (HM 60, 72). Thus the methodological question that Foucault poses to us is wrapped up in how Man experiences himself and his alienated truth through figures and experiences of (un)reason (HM 80).

The threat of passion, which Foucault develops as an embodied experience within these schematics of (un)reason, functions as an excessive force, a condition of madness, a rupture of causality, and a liberating unity (HM 230). Breaking “the totality of the body and the soul”, it privatizes unreason as a psychological or familial affair (HM 90). In his historical accounts of differentiated experiences of madness, Foucault argues that “[it] is still true today that our scientific and medical knowledge of madness rests implicitly on the prior constitution of an ethical experience of unreason” (HM 91). Its cure, the therapeutic response of modernity, becomes “a reminder of the moral law, a return to order and fidelity to the law, reopening of the self to truth....[so that] only reason could liberate the self from unreason” (HM 329-30). Thus the domain of unreason becomes neutralized, Foucault argues, not as sacrilegious but as progressing in the realm of psychology to found “a science of man by turning the previously sacred into the moral” (HM 94). These attempts at neutralization get at how morality is always already trapped in the theological, with appeals to the good life that necessitate a particular human subject, with something outside of itself to regulate its codes of conduct and to approve
its ethical standing, be it God or some other juridical figure. Every classificatory practice imposes a (Schmittian) problem of the sacred and the profane in interpellating a particular ‘human’ for its distinctions to make sense, inevitably leaving a beyond intact – indeed, the self, invested in the human and the divine, remains a primary site of contestation. The transcendental ideals of good and evil, never fully accessible to the human, reaffirm this orientation of the problematics of fullness and perfection (in the form of freedom) as telling analytics in critical theory and praxis.

In this context, errors as “ethical failings” bring out the morality of critique, or critique as morality and virtuous practice (HM 96). Through its transcendental appeal to an emancipation from the weaknesses of human reason (of the Kantian problematic), the obsession to truth mediates its character, from fault to crime, as exemplified by Foucault’s reading of madness. The morality of truth so appears in this way, tied to profanation and the boundaries of the sacred, “for in all cases the refusal of truth [is] the result of the same moral abandonment” (HM 100). The servitude of unreason as an ethical imperative toward salvation echoes the Kantian concern for the “the compromised nature of reason”, the cause and guilt of our finitude located in a moral order that seeks to justify its search for order – and so the critical project remains haunted by these legacies and structural concerns (HM 99).

In brief, the very civilizational tendencies that are used against unreason nurture it: whether in terms of religion as an excess of moral rigour obsessed with salvation and punishment, or of the paranoid epistemological anxiety of modern science with proof and objectivity (HM 367). Foucault notes an interesting tension (in this case historically) of the different forms of relations between truth, sociality, and the self:
In madness, man is separated from his own truth, and exiled into the immediate presence of surroundings in which he loses himself. When men of the classical age lost the truth, it meant that they were thrown back to an immediacy where their animal nature raged, and the primitive decay that accompanied it was a sure sign of original guilt. But to talk of a madman in the nineteenth century was to single out a man who had abandoned the ground of his own immediate truth and had lost himself. (HM 380)

Freedom thus serves as a function of (un)reason, whereby animality or the improper use of freedom concludes in alienation from a humanist essence. The experience/structure of alienation in turn depends heavily on epistemological practices, as an intrinsically humanist conception of a distanced essence regulated by claims to (un)reason. Alienation provides a foundation for positivism, with something always objectively there from which to be alienated, hence its epistemological character and the possibility of correctionality. In this context, the function of critique remains to bring us closer to the truth that will unite our essence with its moral order founded on supporting epistemic realities – indeed what motivates Kant’s critique of pure reason and corresponding concerns for the eschatological threats of disorder.

In necessitating a return to a pre-existing self, the humanist core of reason for which the humanitarian seeks to provide, we find blame for the past and intimations of the future. This moralistic rationality sets up a model of accountability in which the alienated as legal subjects are not held responsible to the same degree as social subjects – and so “the jurisprudence of alienation”, limiting but not obliterating their juridical existence according to a developmentalist humanism of guardianship (HM 129). Herein lies “homo natura, or a normal man pre-existing all experience of mental illness” as constitutive of personhood, of the (non)human (HM 129). To put it otherwise, the developmentalism of reason centres on the ability to form judgements by distinguishing
truth from falsehood, and so functions as a return to childhood and/through guardianship – not as a necessary rupture, but as a “circle of sameness” that Foucault detects in the demands of reason \(HM 350\). The language of objectivity – of modern science and the (medical) technocrat – refuses to speak to madness but in its own language of reason, and so retreats to sameness. Foucault notes an interesting problem in this anthropologizing tendency, whereby truth is threatened by unreason as a mark of Man’s finitude, “the scandal of the human condition” and the fragile “limit of the incarnation of reason”:

From the moment when philosophy became anthropology, and when men decided to find their place and their plenitude of the natural order, the animal world lost that power of negativity, and assumed the positive form of an evolution between the determinism of nature and the reason of man....Unreason meant nothing more than immorality and the possibility of a contagious fault, while madness showed men how close to the animal world their fall could take them, as well as teaching them how far divine forgiveness could reach when it consented to save mankind. Madness showed how close to the animal world the fall could take man....the guilty innocence of the animal in man. \(HM 158, 151-5\)

Foucault captures this analytic of alienation (of the self-discovery of truth) in claiming that “[w]hen man is liberated from all the moral myths that tended to hold his truth, what becomes apparent is that the truth of this unalienated truth, what becomes apparent is nothing other than alienation itself” \(HM 455\). This represents a particular relationship of Man to his truth, embodied by the figure of the citizen, who Foucault expresses as “the place, the instrument and the judge” of the decision reason/unreason \(HM 445\). This relationship of the self to the self, locked in Man’s finitude, enables what Foucault aptly describes as technologies of reason, which he exemplifies through the instrumentality of a straightjacket:

The straightjacket should not be seen as the humanisation of chains, or as a progress towards ‘self-restraint’. A process of conceptual dedication leads to the straightjacket, showing in madness, the experience was no longer of an absolute
conflict between reason and unreason, but rather of a play – always relative, always mobile – between freedom and its limits. (*HM* 439)

These tensions give form to a struggle between the structures of liberation and protection, as captured in the modern experience of madness that Foucault offers that mark alienation as “the secret truth at the heart of all objective knowledge of man” (*HM* 459, 462). As also elaborated in my reading of *The Order of Things*, Man as the subject/object of a positive science of Man enables these aporetic conditions of (un)reason. Given that modern unreason, or madness, takes the status of “a disease, not of nature nor of man himself, but of society”, the implicated cure that Foucault problematizes is “the return to the inalienable” – the drive to find the asocial truth of primitive Man in his moral, natural, and humanist essence (*HM* 472). Freedom thus comes into play in terms of Man’s “rejoining humanity as a recognized social type”, then freed from animality as chains (*HM* 478). Herein lies a dominant logic of reason and its critical capacities, perhaps why madness serves, for Foucault, as the easiest way to objectify Man into a science.

In this context, guilt functions as a form of self-consciousness, an object for another through the alienated Man’s return to freedom (*HM* 485). So through limits on freedom, it is possible to discover/recover responsibility, which presupposes that a space can rid itself of responsibility, obligation, limits, constraints, and finitude to become a pure negativity. It also affirms a particular kind of sovereign subjectivity that enables one to even conceive freedom as a negative space with guarded entry points and (dis)qualified subjects. In the case of unreason, or Foucault’s madman, guilt becomes a threat to self-restraint, regulated in an immediate system of rewards and punishments – a
moral consciousness in a universe of judgement, in a psychoanalytic “indefinite monologue of the surveyed” (*HM 488*). Surveillance and judgement assume the two key modalities of guilt, with the gaze mediating reason and madness via guardians and patients and thus securing “a mode of sovereignty for their guardians”, affirming a “style of existence” and “parental complex” of sorts (*HM 489-90*).

These mobilizations of the limits of freedom as epistemic forms of moral correctionality, which Foucault exemplifies through the modern asylum, set up “a religious domain stripped of religion, a domain of pure morality and ethical uniformity” (*HM 493*). Such mechanisms of (un)reason thus function as a “moral power of consolation, confidence, and docile faithfulness to nature”, ironically a “primitive form of morality” and purification (*HM 493*). Madness becomes the “cause, model and limit” of The Fall, and the patient becomes “trapped in a relation to the self that [is] of the order of guilt, and in a non-relation to others that [is] of the order of shame” through an “averted gaze” (*HM 497*). Thus self-recognition performs the call to examine oneself through the transparency of objectivity and a “spectacle of truth”: an “apotheosis of the self” (*HM 497-99*). Imprisoned in this moral world, this judicial space, the figures of unreason “are to know that they are observed, judged and condemned”, with the figures of the doctor/technocrat simply intervening as “a moral and juridical guarantee of good faith” (*HM 501, 504*).

These exercises of/on the self are thus able to secure positivism’s objectivity as the effect of a domination to manage, direct, and regulate conduct with the power to undo alienation: likewise Foucault expounds how “objectivity [is] a reification of a magical type...starting out from a transparently clear moral framework which was slowly
forgotten as positivism imposed the myth of scientific objectivity” (*HM* 509). The constitutive freedom of (un)reason then makes it that “madness is only possible as a result of a very distant but very necessary moment where it splits from itself in the free space of its non-truth, constituting itself by the very process of truth” (*HM* 514). This ambivalence of Man’s interiority/exteriority condemns his relationship to truth as always to his truth, and yet also as “the spectacle of a naked truth of Man” – subjectively objective, objectively subjective: “not a liberation of the mad but an objectification of the concept of their liberty” (*HM* 515).

**Concluding Remarks: The Problematic of Critique through (Un)Reason and (Dis)Order**

These various games of truth, rituals and spectacles of an “apotheosis of the self”, situate (un)reason and (dis)order as telling organizations of the sorts of epistemological and ontological inheritances that make up critique’s moral claims, wrapped up in the alienations of objectivity as negotiations of Man’s empirico-transcendentality. Herein I locate the aporias of any critical project that follows from these dictates of a modern subjectivity/objectivity of the Kantian challenge. Foucault’s efforts to rework our inherited analytics of truth, within the aporetic possibilities of the Kantian tradition, to propose an ontology of ourselves and our present historically situated through relations of power, provides a productive site to struggle through how the logic of immanence/transcendence implicates such fundamental organizing principles of critical thought as (un)reason, (dis)order, liberty, limits, freedom, and alienation, among other moralized thematics. This is how I understand the implication of the problematic of
critique – methodologically, struggling to think through the logic, subjects, and effects of these practices.

Thus my concern, as developed here, is with how critique as limit-analysis, as a rational, emancipatory practice situated in Man’s disciplinary finitude, operates as a form of governmentality or praxis of the self, to which Foucault’s analyses seem to be vulnerable while attentive to its aporetic manifestations. I therefore hope that this encounter with Foucault’s struggles with the problematics of order/disorder, sameness/difference, finitude/infinity, and reason/unreason – within the context of the Kantian, and to a lesser extent Schmittian, negotiations of the challenge of immanence/transcendence – facilitates a serious consideration of the entanglement of critique in these political, epistemic, and moral strategies. In addition to setting a rich context in which to engage critique as a practice, with its historical commitments to these technologies of governing thought and praxis, I hope that these explorations also draw attention to how the Foucauldian struggle with power, knowledge, and subjectivity leads to a critical ethos mired in ethics and practices of the self. On that note, let us now consider these implicated orientations more specifically, turning to Foucault’s late works that explicitly pose these problems, while remaining attentive to these earlier struggles.
CHAPTER TWO
Critique as Governmentality: Engaging Subjects of Emancipation

*Governmentalizations of a Critical Ethos: Foucault’s Politics of Truth*

In this chapter, I engage further the implicated methodologies, subjects, and effects of critique as a practice, notably by thinking through Foucault’s mobilizations of the *critical ethos* and the *care of the self* in his late works. I first elaborate, more explicitly, Foucault’s commitments to the interrelationship of critique and “governmentalization”, which gives form to his critical project via experimentations in a “historical ontology of ourselves”. I then push the import of this project by considering its contemporary currency through Butler’s efforts to tease apart the role of critique in political and ethical philosophy via some Foucauldian lines of inquiry. I conclude by drawing out the aporetic conditions of modern subjectivity that play into critique as a historical practice, and its realizations through the limit-analyses of political and ethical technologies of subjectivation that seem so often to define our struggles with our modernities.

I begin by reviewing Foucault’s lectures and essays on Kant (1978-1984), collected in *The Politics of Truth*, to explore how critique, or the attitude of critique and resistance, functions as a discourse and practice of modernity – implicating particular models of truth, subjectivity, and power through corresponding historical, philosophical, and political modes of inquiry. I primarily set the 1978 lecture “What is Critique?” in its response to Kant’s 1784 piece “What is Enlightenment?”, as a site to think through how Foucault negotiates our intellectual inheritances via the Kantian critical project to orient critique, resistance, and politics after the Revolution, questioning what it means to be
critical today when the “despotic rationality” of revolutionary aspirations continues to (re)produce that which it seeks to resist (ET 11). Rereading Enlightenment traditions though the interplay of critique, revolution, scientificity, technicity, statism, and Christianity, among other defining features of modernity, Foucault interrogates how individual and collective governmentalization informs critique as a limit-analysis concerned with “truth on its effects of power”, as “the will to not be governed thusly, like that, by these people, at this price” (WC 75).

Foucault thus attempts to “event-alize” our relations to historically situated regimes, as the conditions of possibility in which we live and think, through an experimental critical ethos grounded not in an “analytic of truth”, but in an immanent “ontology of ourselves, an ontology of the present” (ET 16, WR 94-95). In approaching critique as a set of practices of “insubordination” or “desubjugation”, he proposes these methodological strategies to help us make sense of its relations to various “technologies of the self” (WC 47). As a potentiality developed through Kantian critique, this critical attitude, he argues, is distinctive in its “reflective relation to the present” – indeed, a problematizing potential and necessary condition of politics (WE 111, WP 141). Cautious of the universalist, rationalist, governmentalizing danger of Kantian intellectual emancipation/maturation (that is, how only “man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage” makes him “capable of managing freedom”), Foucault reformulates this problem in terms of how to free critique from subject-centred reason, as grounded not in the human or the divine but in historicity (WA 37). His attention to processes of subjectivation thus directs his questioning into possible transgressions, rather than the Kantian legislative reason of Enlightenment.
Foucault further develops historicity in how he explores the theologico-political dimensions of Enlightenment, notably through a genealogy of the critical attitude made possible by Christian ideals of truth, authority, and the self. The Christian obligation to truth directed toward salvation through obedience, confession, self-exposure/discovery/examination, and self-knowledge/renunciation/purification constitutes a particular “art of governing men” that demands a “hermeneutics of the self” (WC 43, ST 156). In setting “Christianity as the cradle of Western hermeneutics of the self”, Foucault offers a genealogy of the modern subject that integrates “coercion technologies” and “self-technologies” in historically constituting the subject (CC 170, ST 155). He thus problematizes how Western philosophies of the self have depended upon the boundaries between truth and error, freedom and constraint, the transcendental and the immanent – exemplified by Cartesian subjectivity (ST 152). Situating the dominance of this sort of “permanent critique of ourselves” within an “epistemological technology of the self”, he suggests that perhaps our focus should lie not in seeking “the positive foundation for the self”, but in assuming “the self [as] nothing else than the historical correlations of the technology built in our history” (WE 110, CC 190).

However, Foucault proposes that we negotiate this orientation toward “the politics of ourselves” through a “history of the present” by seeking to change or rid ourselves of these technologies and their corresponding sacrifices. Although he affirms that there is “no foundational recourse, no escape within a pure form”, there seems to be a tension in how one should deal with governmentalization, as if the eradication of certain technologies through a care of the self would enable an immanent transcendentalism through which the subject could work on the subject as distanced from the world (WC
In negotiating these problematics of immanence/transcendence, he proposes that we consider “strategics” as a form of analysis to get at “the complex interplay between what replicates the same process and what transforms it” (WC 65). This highlights the self-referentiality of immanent logic, which Foucault argues necessitates the subject as “both element and actor” through a Kantian self-reflexivity of “the present as a philosophical event” and the problematizing of our own actuality (WR 85). Through this Foucault also makes us aware of the temporalizing nature of such endeavours rooted in the Enlightenment, which “situated itself in terms of its past and its future...by indicating how it had to operate within its own present” (WR 86).

Yet in ascribing critique a function beyond utility, Foucault complicates these dynamics by referring to this critical attitude as a “virtue”, which frames it as a moral imperative, a regulative ideal (WC 43). The potential dangers of this move are in how critical thought and praxis have often been mired in the heroic struggles of beautiful souls – indeed, the self-righteous moralizing, structural paranoia, and the purifying martyrdom that I previously cited. These tensions constitutive of critique function as a governmentality of the self, as an epistemological praxis of the self – a danger that Foucault does not fully ignore, but lapses into throughout his work on the critical ethos. This appeal to critique thus enables the reproduction of sovereign subjectivities (akin to a Kantian mastery of the self), legitimated in its moral status through its resistance to governmentalization toward a care of the self, a sort of liberatory escape or retreat into the self. This slippage in Foucault’s logic is indicative of the ways in which ethics and critical philosophy often fail to meet the stakes of politics, of political negotiation. Foucault’s ethos of reflexivity, which invites subjects to make themselves aware of
themselves as subjects of particular relations of knowledge, ethics, and power, has the potential to slip into the same moves of Kantian critique as a process of trying to free oneself from certain forms of power through knowledge (WE 113, 100-1).

Foucault’s historic-critical ethos, attitude, and “philosophical life” are thus grounded in an “historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them....that is, a patient labor giving form to our impatience for liberty” (WE 119, italics mine). In seeking “to transform the [Kantian] critique conducted in the form of necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression”, his efforts to challenge the transcendental “search for formal structures with universal value” seem to succumb to a transgressive desire that cannot evade the same sorts of structural problems that it attempts to resist (WE 113). Thus the difficulty lies in negotiating Foucault’s “ethics of discomfort”, necessary for such a critical ethos, without lapsing into binaries of norm/exception manifest in such emancipatory, transgressive projects and into the languages of ruptures and multiplicities that reinforce their oppositionalities. Given these concerns, Foucault provides an important caveat regarding the stakes of our political imaginations, to which we may need to hold him more rigorously:

But if we are not to settle for the affirmation or the empty dream of freedom, it seems to me that this historic-critical attitude must also be an experimental one. I mean that this work done at the limits of ourselves must, on the one hand, open up a realm of historical inquiry and, on the other, put itself to the test of reality, of contemporary reality, both to grasp the points where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take. This means that the historical ontology of ourselves must turn away from all projects that claim to be global or radical. In fact, we know from experience that the claim to escape from the system of contemporary reality so as to produce the overall programs of another society, of another way of thinking, another culture, another vision of the world, has led only to the return of the most dangerous traditions. (WE 114)
Through his historical accounts of the governmentalizations of societies and individuals, particularly in Enlightenment Europe, not only does Foucault rely upon totalizing historical narratives, however qualified at times, he moreover claims that “the history of knowledge constitutes a privileged point of view for the genealogy of the subject” (WC 42, ST 151). This epistemological penchant constrains/enables how he establishes important, yet problematic, relationships between critique and governmentalization, with the critical attitude “as both partner and adversary to the arts of governing, as an act of defiance, as a challenge, as a way of limiting these arts of governing and sizing them up, transforming them, of finding a way to escape from them or, in any case, a way to displace them, with a basic distrust, but also and by the same token, as a line of development of the arts of governing...” (WC 44-5, italics mine).

Reflecting upon limits and how Kantian critique seeks to know the limits of knowledge (with liberty at stake in the creation of self-legislated autonomous spaces), Foucault understands critique as “the art of voluntary insubordination, that of reflected tractability...[to] insure the desubjugation of the subject in the context of what we could call, in a word, the politics of truth” (WC 49, 47). If critique is designated to limit governmentalization and desubjugate the subject through epistemological “distrust”, is Foucault effectively disrupting the subject-centred reason of the inheritances that he negotiates? Although he insists that these approaches are getting at the problem of power and not so much of knowledge, the epistemological nature of these methods is troubling in how they seem to consistently come back to, and be haunted by, the foundational Cartesian subject. His turn to “eventualization” highlights the interplay of power/knowledge regimes as methodologically useful, yet, in nonetheless evoking
“conditions of acceptability” rather than an analytic of truth, a slippage emerges in how he then applies this to critique (WC 59, 61). This also brings out how situating the limit-analysis of Kantian critique, dependent upon a politics of finitude, as his point of departure renders his analysis overly epistemological: “the problem of questioning knowledge on its limits or impasses” presupposes a certain transcendental approach to truth which, I argue here, cannot be transformed through immanence (WC 68).

Given that “critique finds its anchoring point in the problem of certainty in its confrontation with authority”, perhaps this understanding of critique that excessively privileges the epistemological might be qualified by how Foucault understands power/knowledge regimes not through the form or status of knowledge, but through a questioning of the conditions of possibility of subjectivity itself – that is, the relationships among knowledge, power, and the subject (WC 46). The orientation of the subject, however, brings out its own similar problems, caught between the various epistemological and ontological demands constitutively imposed upon it. In (de)centring the subject as the site of analysis, this approach then fixes critique as instrumental: Foucault himself asserts that “critique only exists in relation to something other than itself: it is an instrument, a means of a future or a truth that it will not know nor happen to be, it oversees the domain it would want to police and is unable to regulate” (WC 42).

Seemingly subordinated in relation to fields of knowledge, critique then exhibits a degree of separability with respect to the constitution of knowledge. However much he appreciates critique as “condemned to dispersion, dependency, and pure heteronomy”, affording critique a merely instrumental function seems to make it into a somewhat neutral medium or virtue to something greater, as opposed to a relational negotiation of
knowledge, power, ethics, and subjectivity (WC 42). Notwithstanding this caveat, Foucault’s identification of a desire not to be governed in a certain way by accepting a certain truth invites us to explore the interplay of critique and governmentalization as challenging the boundaries between the particular and the general, negativity and positivity, immanence and transcendence.

In thinking through these potential dangers in Foucault’s logic of critique (and its corresponding practices), it is not my intention to identify so much ‘errors’ in his work, but how such questions of critique and governmentalization implicate so much, so thoroughly. Indeed, the political dimensions of his method highlight the significance of the historical ontology of ourselves as “an analysis that relates to what we are willing to accept in our world – to accept, to refuse, and to change, both in ourselves and in our circumstances. In sum, it is a question of searching for another kind of critical philosophy. Not a critical philosophy that seeks to determine the conditions and limits of our possible knowledge of the project, but a critical philosophy that seeks the conditions and the indefinite possibilities of transforming the subject, of transforming ourselves” (ST 152-3). The notion of transgression implied in this approach raises some important problems of the transcendentalism of transgression, the (re)production of certain (dis)orders through mechanisms of norm/exception, and the moralistic dangers expounded earlier, while nonetheless stressing the experimental nature of critique that functions not through “a gesture of rejection” via outside/inside alternatives, but through work “at the frontiers” (ST 153, WE 113).

Foucault’s explorations into critique call attention to the importance of the Kantian critical project, and the Enlightenment more broadly, in setting certain conditions
of possibility of critique for Western inheritance. The question of how we constitute meaning must thus grapple with the various interplays of truth, power, and subjectivity, and the role of limits in mediating their tensions (WC 57). However rich the analysis, to mobilize critique as a form of self-reflexivity, indebted to a Kantian limit-analysis and politics of finitude, privileges an escapist, freedom-inspired, epistemological praxis of the self as the starting point for critical thought and praxis. Although Foucault is wary not to call for an “originary freedom” in an absolute rejection of governmentalization, he at times slips into enacting these models of subjectivity through the practice of critique. Nonetheless, he pushes us to consider how critique and governmentalization are intimately bound in constituting our political imaginations. This encounter with Foucault’s critical ethos, oriented through Kantian legacies, incites a serious consideration of how critique (and resistance as its praxis) functions as a form of governmentality.

In sum, Foucault’s commitment to an immanent, experimental critique, questioning of the conditions under which we accept/resist certain modes of thinking and living, offers a rich understanding of the complex dynamics informing practices of critique. In pushing us to think through the conditions of possibility of our political imaginations, Foucault demands that we consider how we are implicated and subjectivated in regimes of truth and power. Perhaps herein lies our challenge as well as our very inspiration for struggling with our inheritances toward more productive negotiations of the “perpetual mobility, essential fragility” of how we understand and (re)produce ourselves as subjects through a historical ontology of ourselves (WC 65, WE 113).
Critique, Politics, and Ethics: Foucauldian Virtues, Butlerian Desires

Foucault’s attempts to get at “another kind of critical philosophy” bring out various productive struggles that continue to haunt critical thought and praxis, in our ceaseless negotiations of the epistemic and ontological demands of the emancipatory, transformative, transgressive, disruptive, subversive, or however else we choose to express/deny the structural ethics of our methodological approaches. In hopes to work through how these dominant problematics continue to inform/delimit contemporary critical thought, I now move to considering Butler’s efforts to trace, through critique, “a more productive approach to the place of ethics within politics” as a way to get at contemporary manifestations, negotiations, and effects of this Foucauldian approach to a critical ethos (WCF 4).

In particular, what draws me to Butler’s appropriation of a Foucauldian critical ethos is how her very framing of the problem of critique gets at what I have been developing as its moralistic imperatives to rectify or justify as a practice through which we can emancipate ourselves from the governmentalities that we are seeking to resist – and thus in resistance becomes a governmentality itself! This concern with the moral self, struggling in what she declares as less than ideal social conditions, sets up an escapism against which such lament takes hold in defining her new ethical project as grounded in an acceptance of the individual’s opacity and finitude. But why orient the problem as one that is already a lack, already an imperfection? Or more to the point, how does this privileging of intersubjective vulnerability get caught in the Kantian legacies of finitude, negativity, and limits that I have argued here seek to transform transcendence through
immanence, constituting a governmentality of resistance?

Butler’s attempt to rework the human subject in order to facilitate critical autonomy in ethical life sets up a questioning of ‘I’ as a starting point for ethics and politics; she thus slips into the solipsism of immanence as a desire for emancipations from the sovereign dictates of our modern subjectivities (or as some have argued, post-subjectivities). Her focus on the lack of self-transparency and narratibility of this ethical subject thus functions through the sort of epistemic paranoia that I previously developed in that it allows itself to be dictated by the same constitutive fears of a sovereign subjectivity (such as through a sort of Cartesian scepticism). Starting from lack, how does the yearning for perfection, completion, and fullness not implicate the desires and anxieties of this ethical subject? And how does a resignation to the impossibility of these attempts at self-mastery, for which Butler argues, deny the aporetic conditions that make possible these ‘critical’ reflections on the ‘limits’ of the human? This anti-agonistic approach, which eschews violence as a form of repression that presupposes a sovereign subjectivity to violate, proposes that we understand ethics as a form of critique mediating the norms that govern us as fallible subjects, with responsiveness, vulnerability, and humility as its main instruments (indeed, the imperatives of an intersubjectivity). But were we ever non-responsive to begin with? Were we ever not vulnerable to begin with? Why then is this “humility” the precondition for Butler’s ethical project (GAO 42)?

In pushing the import of these challenges to get at the possibilities/limits of contemporary ethical and political philosophy, Butler’s methodological orientation has already absorbed these assumptions of a (post-)sovereign subjectivity in its aspired trajectories. To submit to know ourselves only incompletely, as in Butler’s appeal to an
emancipatory ethics, is to accept the perfection or fullness of a beyond. Herein we find the politics of resistance, which can never free itself from the oppositionalities that haunt its own constitutive fears and desires. If we were to give up on the moral principle of our absolute sovereignty (what Butler seeks to do) or of our humble situated limits (what I am arguing in response), could we experiment with methodological approaches that effectively confront these aporias in the questions with which we struggle? Could we submit to negotiation rather than incompleteness, opacity, and lack?

Although Butler’s appeal to the social as defining the conditions of possibility for these discussions is rich, complex, and helpful in many ways, her drive to resist the rationality, consistency, and continuity of inherited subjectivities, and the ensuing ethical problems of self-beratement and violence, requires a sociality that precedes us – and perhaps it is this temporal logic of sociality (and its facile question, is the I forming before or after the social?) that leads to the anxiety of impossibility that always already functions as a denial of the aporetic. Indeed, how could we take an aporia seriously if we already know its resolution (in Butler’s case, that we are indeed opaque and not transparent as ethical subjects)? These are the questions that motivate my engagement with Butler’s ethical project that seeks to reconceptualize a politically responsible subject through practices of critique.

So what does this mean for the nature and function of critique as a historical practice of emancipation? Butler’s inquiry into the Foucauldian concern for a critical ethos locates the ambiguities of ethics and politics as the site to work through the governmentalizing demands of individuality and collectivity as modes of ethical and political life. Concerned with the operation of critique, or otherwise put “a philosophy of
critique”, Butler engages the Foucauldian virtue of critique’s praxis, and its corresponding ethical problem of freedom, of a critique “beyond judgment”, to challenge the conventional fault-finding function of critique (WCF 1-2). In her response to Foucault’s project, “What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue”, she thus explores his attempt to make critique into a virtuous activity of questioning the limits and governmentalizations of our most dominant ways of thinking, what she takes as “a new practice of values based on that very suspension [of judgment]” (WCF 2).

This aspiration toward a non-judgmental critique in effect centres the methodological contestations of evaluative and descriptive orientations (perhaps in this context framed through Habermasian and Foucauldian approaches), and how they depend on particular spatiotemporal analytics that set up accompanying domains and sequences for the juridical operation of critique. Even with, or shall I say, because of Foucault’s attempts to consider the conditions of good/bad as opposed to the content of good/bad itself, the structural imperatives of such a moralizing orientation trap, and are intensified by, his efforts to escape them – that is, the desire to move beyond a prescriptive or juridical morality as an even more intensified transcendental anxiety, indeed, denotative of liberal claims-based approaches to freedom. Perhaps this addresses the problem of starting points and methodological orientation; perhaps not. Herein lies the struggle of form/substance, to not get trapped in the former’s hyperstructuralisms or the latter’s disavowals.

Concerned with such demands of ethics, Butler takes up an Adornian critique of critique, which cautions against the rendering of rigid subject/object relations whereby the ‘object’ of critique assumes a “thinglike form” rather than embedded in praxis,
leading to “fetishized isolated categories” that Butler cites as critique’s “constitutive occlusion” (WCF 2). Adorno’s concern for critique’s “withdrawal from praxis” reaffirms the haunting of the philosophy of the subject, with its embrace/rejection of the separation of the self from the world (perhaps, in this case, a Marxian concern with the critical enterprise) (WCF 2). Foucault’s *poiesis* might also be motivated by this haunting that seeks to reconcile Man with the World, not through technocratic formation or romantic creation, but through the rigours of a critical ethos. This project sets up an aesthetics of the subject (what Butler calls a “self-making”) which, oriented toward a politics/ethics of desubjugation, reproduces the same sort of normativity that he seeks to resist, mired in an existential angst that privileges an exceptionalist logic of risk – that is, the risking of “a mode of existence...unsupported by what he calls the regime of truth” (WCF 3-4). Yet how is this unsupported resistance or self-transformation even viable, if the subject is always already caught within immanence – is this an ethical, linguistic, political, or otherwise functional lack? Or does this frustration draw from the shared provision of norms, languages, standards, and the like, which disallow the stable functioning of inclusive exclusions or exclusive inclusions, rendering oppositionality banal?

What, then, can we make of limits that are always already caught in this aporetic (un)ambiguity, which can never be contained as pure negativity or positivity? They cannot thus function through a model of intersectionality (or hybridity), but does Butler’s concern with the “unknowing” (as a basis for response-ability), or Foucault’s concern with “intelligibility” (of, for example, good/bad) not require a form of moral decisionism for critique to function (GAO 136)? I will take on decisionism as methodology later in this piece, thinking through the limit-analyses of critique, but for now, perhaps we could
consider how these concerns contribute to the dangers of a limit-analysis that consistently seems to get caught in the politics of ruptures, exceptionalism, and crisis; Butler seeks to address this problem, as such, but effectively reifies its methodological hold:

One does not drive to the limits for a thrill experience, or because limits are dangerous or sexy, or because it brings us into a titillating proximity with evil. One asks about the limits of ways of knowing because one has already run up against a crisis within the epistemological field in which one lives. The categories by which social life are ordered produce a certain incoherence or entire realms of unspeakability. And it is from this condition, the tear in the fabric of our epistemological web, that the practice of critique emerges, with the awareness that no discourse is adequate here or that our reigning discourses have produced an impasse. (*WCF* 5, italics mine)

The exceptionalism of critique condemns its emancipatory motivations to dream for, as Foucault expresses, “a future or a truth that it [critique]...would not want to police and is unable to regulate” (*WCF* 5). However qualified against anarchic or orginary freedom, this moralized deferral into existential transcendality casts the “virtue” of critique in a problematic logic of emancipation. Critique correspondingly is to function as “this exposure of the limit of the epistemological field”, which also takes Butler back into questioning, “as if virtue is counter to regulation and order, as if virtue itself is to be found in the risking of established order” (*WCF* 5). This requisite critical relation to norms, or what Butler calls “a specific stylization of morality”, exemplifies the epistemic politics of limits, a trendy analytic full of allure and danger – so another question to return to is: why are we increasingly drawn to limits as analytics and what does this tell us about our situatedness in these conversations and reflexions on critique (*WCF* 6)? Are they inherently spatial analytics (in seeking to contain a region within the furthest boundaries), inherently transcendental through their appeals to immanence (in asserting their finality, however contingent and fleeting), with an infinity always already mapped,
however projected? As a spatialized epistemology, do its aesthetic dictates (of a regulative visuality) impose a temporality secondarily as an organizing principle of the space that it seeks to contain? As such, are limits as analytics functionally trapped within methodologies of negativity through an imperative to impose limits? Do they tell us of a yearning for infinite transgressions as a yearning for control over a finitude? Do they nourish a mood of unambiguous ambiguity? Do they signal a posty (or Enlightenment?) anxiety to find stability in instability, through limit-work? Whatever they tell us of how we are located in these conversations, they tell us a lot. And through these questions, I come back to the problem of the subject in critique and resistance, and thus the problem of governmentality.

In engaging the limit-analyses of Foucault’s critical project that seeks to challenge the governmentalizations of hegemonic ways of thinking, Butler draws out its ethical commitments via critique as a practice through which “[m]oral experience has to do with self-transformation prompted by a form of knowledge that is foreign to one’s own...different from the submission to a command...not primarily or fundamentally structured by prohibition or interdiction” (WCF 6, italics mine). Herein, yet again, critique gets caught within the exceptionalist virtue of desubjugation through an epistemic morality trapped in the virtue of resistance, regulated by binaric idealizations of Dominance/submission, which are mired in liberal imperatives of equality that elide more nuanced submissions that are not condemned to conformity and order, or more nuanced Dominations that are not exercised via a Cartesian anxiety for control and transparency. To fold Foucault onto himself, so to speak, how could we understand this concern with limits as a manifestation of the “repressive hypothesis” that he develops in his earlier
investigations of sexuality through networks of power/resistance (History of Sexuality 95)? Indeed, these concerns with Dominance/submission could be read in this domain of experience – through his S/M explorations, which sought in his work to propose a different negotiation of desire, not as a question of form (a condition in and of itself, developmental and even infantalizing), but as social and political processes of making possible different modes of relations (Foucault, “Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity” 382). This challenge of negotiation, such as through S/M, confronts the “regulated and open” exchanges of power that could strategically facilitate affectional relations not contained by normative demands, whether by problematizing phallocentricty or various other forms of institutionalized relational models (Foucault, “Sexual Choice, Sexual Act 331, 388). And hence Foucault’s qualification that “Liberty is a practice”, never absolute, working “to modify some constraints, to loosen, or even break them, but none of these projects can, simply by its nature, assure that people will have liberty automatically” (Foucault, “Space, Knowledge and Power” 339). Although Foucault, as Butler reminds us, is careful to situate the Enlightenment legacy of “resistance to authority” as a caveat and as his own inheritance, his critical rereadings still succumb to a refashioning of a rational reflexivity/reflexive rationality evaluating “governmental obligation” that demands that “[t]o be critical of an authority that poses as absolute requires a critical practice that has self-transformation at its core” (WCF 8-9). This ensuing ethical stylization, this moral and political critical attitude wrapped in a politics of risk and autonomy, designates critique as an exposure of illegitimacy (WCF 10). However presupposed as particular and not universal or rights-based, it ends up functioning as voluntarism, or freedom-searching, wherever it comes from, as manifest in this
characterization by Butler:

The critical practice does not well up from the innate freedom of the soul, but is formed instead in the crucible of a particular exchange between a set of rules or precepts (which are already there) and a stylization of acts (which extends and reformulates that prior set of rules and precepts). This stylization of the self in relation to the rules comes to count as a ‘practice’. (WCF 11)

However much Foucault puts forward an important methodological caveat, that codes may only be understood in relation to their historical negotiations and modes of subjectivation, by orienting these inquiries toward cultivating relations of the self with the self, he seems to confound the more complicated negotiations of form/substance previously suggested (WCF 6). This tension becomes increasingly the case in how the problem of agency plays into these discussions, with Foucault’s concern for the “intentional and voluntary” within the “arts of existence” (WCF 6). What emerges, though, is a sort of consequentialist temporality of ontology via transformations of a “singular being”, suspended and realized through practices of the self as a “practice of liberty” (WCF 7-8). Singularity, as such, functions through a methodological commitment to a structural or formalist procedure that secures the event, the episteme, or a similar model as a field of power/resistance, as a form of intelligibility. How akin to the analytics of norm/exception, as conditions of possibility of such a structural or formalist methodology: how well eventualization goes with decisionism, limits with finitude, and even the psychoanalytic Other with its affirming I! Plurality is certainly no less problematic, in its designation of discrete possibilities, but perhaps the more interesting question lies in how this methodological orientation enables particular epistemological and ontological projects, such as through Butler’s mobilization of a Foucauldian poiesis to ground ethical responsiveness in opacity and limits.
Butler’s encounter with Foucault’s critical project is thus not able to dispel his commitment, however hesitant, to a politics of risk, limits, finitude, contingency, immanence, and so on, which effectively constitutes critique as a juridical model. This epistemological privileging of constraint functionally conflates the truth (in its various forms) with order, in asking, as Butler does, how “relations of power...circumscribe in advance what will and will not count as truth, which order the world in certain regular and regulatable ways” (WCF 12). And here we confront another haunting, which Butler comes to as “the limits of ontology and epistemology: situating the precariousness of critique’s virtue, the link between the limits of what I might become and the limits of what I might risk knowing” places liberty at stake “at the limits of what one can know” (WCF 13).

These methodological conflations of truth and order (of an epistemic morality) are exacerbated by designating limits as moments that “point up their contingency and their transformability”, thus purifying the mundane from such ruptures (WCF 15). And yet, the inaugural assumption that Butler works through Foucault’s project – that “Critique begins with the presumption of governmentalization and then with its failure to totalize the subject it seeks to know and subjugate” – might need to be extended not only to its role (instigated by these attachments to failure and fullness), but also to its function as a form of governmentalization itself. That is, how critique, motivated by this aspiration in failure, limits the very possibilities of critique (WCF 15, italics mine). This problem takes hold through various mobilizations of critique as mirror, whether through Marxian false consciousness, Nietzschean fiction or genealogy, Adornian withdrawal, or the like. The Foucauldian preoccupation with seeking what Butler describes, in the legacy of the
Frankfurt School, as “the possibility of desubjugation within rationalization without assuming that there is a course for resistance that is housed in the subject or maintained in some foundational mode” is too often, too readily seduced by a spatializing and temporalizing logic of resistance: a logic that functions, however hesitatingly, through deferral and negativity as a refusal of governmentality (what I argue here as a governmentality itself) (WCF 16).

So what does this mean in terms of what Butler suggests as the conclusion of Foucault’s critical project, that “there can be no ethics, and no politics, without recourse to this singular sense of poiesis” (WCF 19)? Perhaps their hope lies in how this self-making is to function not as mere self-knowledge, but as a complicated form of subject/object relations necessitated for moral reflexivity. Yet these practices through which critique “risks its [the subject’s] deformation, occupying that ontologically insecure position” secure via “disobedience” the exceptionality of critique’s virtue: that is, how “virtue becomes the practice by which the self forms itself in desubjugation” (WCF 20). Butler’s appropriation of Foucault’s critical ethos thus also seems to succumb to this romantic privileging of the virtues of critique; indeed, she poses its challenge as “who will be a subject here, and what will count as a life, a moment of ethical questioning which requires that we break the habits of judgment in favour of a riskier practice that seeks to yield artistry from constraint” – but why constraint (WCF 20, italics mine)? Why a delusion of non-judgmentality – perhaps too obviously an ironic question, given the import of limits in these efforts, that these challenges are not taken as inescapable ‘limits’ or practices themselves?
Violence: The Wounds of Critique

So what might we take from this engagement with the Foucauldian critical ethos, wrapped up in explorations of virtue, which Butler exercises as a point of departure for rethinking critical political and ethical philosophy? In Giving an Account of Oneself, she further develops these questions by considering how the social conditions of morality demand particular ethico-political praxes through which subjects must account for themselves. Her explorations provoke a number of methodological points beholden to these technologies of the self, thus setting up a productive exchange with the Foucauldian care of the self as critical ethos.

One telling problem that emerges in her mobilization of an Adornian critique of critique (to initiate her ethical project) gets at how to presuppose, as Adorno claims, that “the value of [critical] thought is measured by its distance from the continuity of the familiar” keeps intact the regulative binaries of norm/exception, familiar/unfamiliar, here/there, near/far, self/other, and the humanist positivity of the “living” and negativity of “annihilation”, while further entrenching these analytics in a moralizing discourse of value maintained by the objectification of distance (GAO 3, 9). These analytics get caught, in turn, within spatiotemporal imperatives of immanence/transcendence that regulate the distance and time necessary for these logical relationships to function. Such idealizations only make sense in relation to their proximity to the self, and herein we find the inescapable problem of the logic of immanence. By privileging the questioning of the self-evident as the opening or rupture of/for morality, this Adornian presumption that Butler evokes as a reflection on critique is contained by a politics of (in)visibility, a politics of paranoia.
These formulations get at how moral philosophy, as regulative ideals of conduct, functions through certain imperatives to discover the truth, or, at the very least, an epistemic praxis. The form of limit-analysis invoked in these moves thus becomes integral to understanding the problem of ethics, as a science or systematic study of morality. And so to approach Foucault’s care of the self as virtue, through its epistemic moralities of critique, we need to consider the corresponding models of the subject as a necessary expounding of the critical ethos. The self, in the context of Butler’s project, always already deploys the other or collectivity as conditions of possibility for these discussions on critique – indeed, to the requisite “giving an account of oneself” for/as the ethical, political, and philosophical practices of critique. This concern certainly converges with Foucault’s own struggles of the subject’s negotiations within regimes of truth and localized strategies of power/resistance. So my encounter with Butler’s foray into moral philosophy is motivated by my interest to engage (a) the status of contemporary critical thought taken up here via these methodological considerations, (b) the negotiation of the psychologisms of critique that I need to address in my explorations of critique as epistemic paranoia (however much I lean toward the dismissal of the former’s scientificity, do not the dangers of psychological and philosophical pursuits converge in their yearning to figure out Man?), and (c) how the logic of critique, through these particular sites, is implicated in moralizing gestures (in an ethics?) that disavow the challenge of political negotiation.

For Butler, the questions of critique, politics, and ethics lead to a discussion of violence, one which I feel gets at these aforementioned concerns of critique’s mission to rectify the injurious in a search for freedom, a freedom from, perhaps – a freedom from
unjust and violent claims on our bodies and minds. She works through Adorno’s struggle with critique as a means to defend against the violence of rationalization, and cautions us that although Adorno is apt to question how the collective ethos functions mostly as a “conservative one” through a “false unity”, this caveat seems to imply that this form of idealization somehow takes on a different form in its non-collective manifestations (GAO 4). The ensuing violence of universality or collectivity, of its presumptions and impositions, I would argue, denotes a particular conception of power through rigid relations of individuality/collectivity that enable critique to assume its mission, its virtue. Does Foucault’s language of ethos to designate critique then presume some kind of a collective challenge in relation to the immanent self? Could this explain his deployment of self-stylization as a mode of critique, as resulting from the same Adornian concern with how “the universal...appears as something violent and extraneous and has no substantial reality for human beings”, and so dependent upon a humanist privileging of a purified internal space (GAO 5)? Perhaps this gets at the problem of scale, of the slipping of discourses of individualism and governance as a paradigmatic form of liberal politics – whether in terms of the Christian legacies of Christ’s body as representative of the kingdom of God, or the Leviathan for the body politic of The People? The rules of these systems take on, as with Adorno’s interest in the individual, a humanist subject – living or annihilated by this relationship to the collective ethos and to morality through ethics. So I wonder, how well does Butler avoid slipping into these humanist tropes in her discussions of moral philosophy through these figures?

Such inquiries into the particular and the universal – exemplary of morality’s behaviouralism (tainted, in this case, by an Adornian prejudice of massification) – seems
condemned to the function of immanence/transcendence and the anxieties of its corresponding subjectivities. The operationalization of violence to make sense of the demands of particularity/universality poses various problems of inclusivity/exclusivity, as evoked by Adorno’s caution that “its [universality’s] violence consists in part of its indifference to the social conditions under which a living appropriation [of ethics] might be possible” (GAO 7). Could we read these ethical concerns with violence that Butler poses as an impulse to safeguard freedom and particularity? Not unaffected by this potential danger, she seeks to rethink ethical violence by centring “the shifting historical character of moral inquiry” (echoing a Foucauldian historicity), notably in the context of moral nihilism (perhaps as a response to the facile attacks against posty orientations?) (GAO 6). Her concern with the functional violence of universality comes back to a Schmittain censure of democratic and scientific models that fix this violence either as a “precondition” or object of participation in an “exclusionary foreclosure” (GAO 6-7).

This necessity of an abstracted universality as the foundation for dialogue brings out the question, whether motivated by an Adornian or even Hegelian/Marxian concern for the violence of abstract universality, are we incessantly trapped in the logic of immanence? Indeed, this is an anxious question so to inflect the anxiety of these sorts of inquiries. For Butler, “the problem is not with universality as such but with an operation of universality that fails to be responsive to cultural particularity and fails to undergo a reformulation of itself in response to the social and cultural conditions it includes within its scope of applicability” (GAO 6). These tensions serve as a rich site to engage the function of logic in genealogy, in our methodologies – what it means in teasing apart analytics of historicity and temporality in how we approach our inquiries, and more to the
point, in critique. Thinking through the logic and mobilization of critique as a project demands that we think through logic and mobilization themselves as practices of critique. To build on previous discussions of this sort that I have offered here, Butler’s orientation suggests that the conditions of mobilization for logic are responsible for the violence of the universalities of ethics, rather than universality itself – so conditions of mobilization, as fields of power/resistance, as opposed to the logical constitution of these conditions.

These methodological concerns also get at the problem of starting points: in the case of violence, the moral subject often functions as an existential subject, resisting ethical violence to affirm her/his morality – not searching for “a pure immediacy, arbitrary or accidental, detached from its social and historical conditions”, as Adorno warns us, but questioning how the I can give an account of itself and appropriate a morality (indeed Butler’s question) (GAO 7). Even if the I is implicated in social relations, as Butler proposes, it is nonetheless starting with itself to give an account of itself. The implicated temporal logic further reaffirms the inaugural fantasies of the immanently transcendental I. Herein we return to Adorno’s argument for the role of distance and unfamiliarity in practices of critique, notably in how Butler works from the spatiotemporal exceptionality of its project toward the subject’s entry into morality through a sort of dispossession – a lack or gap, or a questioning of this lack or gap. This possessive individualism, mired in the psychoanalytic, demands that we carefully consider how the politics of rupture and its epistemic paranoia constitute critique as an ethical praxis. Butler, following Foucault and even Adorno, relies upon this interplay of ethics and truth in their approaches to the critical in telling ways:

In this sense, ethical deliberation is bound up with the operation of critique. And critique finds that it cannot go forward without a consideration of how the
deliberating subject comes into being and how the deliberating subject might actually live or appropriate a set of norms. Not only does ethics find itself embroiled in the task of social theory, but social theory, if it is to yield nonviolent results, must find a living place for this “I”. (GAO 8, italics mine)

The deployment of violence, yet again, raises the question of whether this orientation in Butler’s ethical project, which seeks a nonviolent ethics through the moral self’s critical relations to its governing norms, functions implicitly as a drive toward a purified sacred realm, a transcendental appeal to escape trapped in the philosophy of the subject that haunts Western ethical, philosophical, and political traditions. It thus ascribes resistant analytics to a privileged methodological status, whether through claims to negativity/positivity or particularity/universality, as if the (non)violent were merely an object or characteristic of possession, rather than a mode of relationality. Although not reducible to formalistic logic, the implicated methodologies of positivity/negativity, I would argue, entangle these problematics even further. In highlighting how “Adorno tends to understand a negative dialectics to be at work when claims of collectivity turn out not to be universal, when claims of abstract universality turn out not to be universal”, Butler again privileges a psychoanalytic reading of the Adornian concern with universality and particularity as “what the individual comes to experience...[as] the inaugural experience of morality” (GAO 8-9). But does this I not experience convergence and everything in between, I must ask? Is the universal assuming the place of the mother/father in this sense? What kind of developmentalism is at play in these humanist quests for a place for a “living” I in these ethical games (GAO 9)? I am therefore asking that we consider how objectifiable qualities as such, notably in validating the status of the critical, end up with these sorts of ambiguous commitments to a humanist subject.
Butler understands this Adornian approach in terms of how it “resonates with Nietzsche, who underscores the violence of ‘bad conscience’, which brings the ‘I’ into being as consequence of a potentially annihilating cruelty. [And how the] ‘I’ turns against itself, unleashing its morally condemning aggression against itself, and thus reflexivity is inaugurated” (GAO 9). This Nietzschean presumption also privileges lack for incitement into critique, distancing it as an instrument or object of something greater, rather than as processes of making sense of and engaging with the world. Indeed, Butler evokes Nietzsche to problematize “the self as a causative force” – what Nietzsche laments as a subject “reduced to thinking, inferring, reckoning, co-ordinating cause and effect”, to “consciousness”, perhaps as a distrust for epistemic constructions (GAO 10). So in a rather Foucauldian move, Butler reorients the question from the relation of the subject to morality to “the force of morality in the production of the subject” (GAO 10). However, this search for “a prior relation” sets up a problematic temporality of logic, or more specifically, of the formation of the subject and her/his negotiations in these productions (GAO 10). So does this reorientation that Butler proposes in effect challenge its implicated responses?:

It is one thing to say that a subject must be able to appropriate norms, but another to say that there must be norms that prepare a place within the ontological field for a subject. In the first instance, norms are there, at an exterior distance, and the task is to find a way of appropriating them, taking them on, establishing a living relation to them. The epistemological frame is presupposed in this encounter, one in which a subject encounters moral norms and must find his way with them. But did Adorno consider that norms also decide in advance who will and will not become a subject? Did he consider the operation of norms in the very constitution of the subject, in the stylization of its ontology and in the establishing of a legitimate site within the realm of social ontology? (GAO 9)

Butler’s questioning of the (dis)qualifying subjectivities of these projects
provokes a series of questions regarding the political implications of this temporalized ontology with which I am concerned. To put it otherwise, how does this move not slip into a top-down exercise of power, for do we not have to make sense of ourselves even when not simply interpellated through hegemonic narratives and systems? Where does performativity fit into these questions, notably in terms of the (dis)qualifications of subjects and spatialized experiences of “an exterior distance”? These questions of violence, authenticity, and ethics set a problematic framework for critique, consistently rendering epistemic moralities through its claims to the (non)violent. Even if Butler’s ethical project of giving an account of oneself is always responsive to a “scene of address” or “interlocutory scene”, rather than incited simply through lack, fear, or some other inaugural story of an exceptional nature, a juridical framework is nonetheless instantiated through this moral ontology that slips into an anti-Cartesian autonomy through retrospection (GAO 13). This move is furthermore problematic in how Butler is then able to conclude that the resistance to narrate oneself equates to a questioning of the legitimacy of authority and its domain of autonomy – yet, does this not only fix resistance into an existential project to reaffirm one’s sovereign mastery over the situation, making no no more radical than yes? This problem highlights, once again, how positivity and negativity support each other methodologically in a way that critique through its analytics of resistance cannot account for, as exemplified by these tensions in Butler’s ethical project.

Butler is indeed cautious of the Kantian-Enlightenment legacy of self-reflexivity (and its resistances) and seeks not to totalize these formative stories of subjectivity and moral agency, especially in how it endows the subject with “causal agency” in
affirming/negating itself as causation (GAO 69, 83, 12). She reminds us how the Nietzschean negotiation of the morality of a guilty conscience bringing about a “reflexivity on the model of self-beratement” challenges us to think about how a reflexive subject places herself/himself as the object of reflection, and the ensuing temporal logic of interpellations (GAO 14). If we attempt to displace the psychoanalytic, or Nietzschean, privileging of lack (and its entanglements in the problematics of fullness and perfection that I previously discussed), then are we impelled to take up the option that Butler pursues in the late Foucault? I refer here to the turn to a care of the self, through reflexivity and critique, as a way to depart from how she may have earlier (in The Psychic Life of Power) too readily accepted this punitive scene of inauguration for the subject. Butler’s concern with the presumption of this “subject who internalizes the law”, which she proposes as exemplary of the early Foucault’s notion of power and subjectivity (such as in Discipline and Punish or even the first volume of History of Sexuality) seems to miss how reflexivity and critique themselves are practices often committed to those same inaugural fantasies of rectifying a lack or error, with their own punitive moralities (GAO 15). So what do these histories of critique mean for a critical project that ends up with the dictates of the self-reflexivity of an opaque, post-sovereign subject which Butler seeks to advance via Foucault’s care of the self?

Care of the Self as Critical Ethos: The Late Foucault, or I, You, We?

Although, I would argue, Foucault’s thematics of capillary networks of power/resistance could work against (at least methodologically) the more reductionist appropriation of his earlier models of the subject, his later shift toward a more pointed
examination of the hermeneutics of the subject brings out a number of productive lines of inquiry for critique as a historical practice. As developed at the beginning of this chapter, his inquiries into the complicity between Christian and scientific hermeneutics highlight a number of problems regarding the self’s relationship to the self, notably in terms of how it is mediated through regimes of truth. My concern, however much I could develop this line more extensively, is with how this preoccupation with technologies of the subject, notably as expounded through governmentality, leads (him) to the care of the self as a critical ethos. That is, does the orientation of a governmentality that seeks through immanence to work through “how the government of the self is integrated with the government of others” necessarily conclude with the solipsistic immanence of care of the self, as we can pick up in some of Foucault’s late works (Foucault, “The Concern for Truth” 457)? If not necessarily, how does it conclude in this way and what caveats could we discern from this line of reasoning? So I am asking, as one who appreciates the technologies of governmentality as a way to negotiate immanence/transcendence and the intersubjective, to draw on a limited language, what can we make of these conclusions of sorts, these aporetic tensions that I have been teasing apart through Foucault, notably in how his earlier works (markedly The Order of Things and History of Madness as previously discussed) put forth these challenges and his late works seem to submit to them differently?

Herein lies my interest in thinking through the late Foucault via Butler’s mobilization of the ethical and political project of critique, to get at how these conclusions or implications mediate contemporary tensions in critical thought and praxis. To put it differently, why the ‘turn’ to ethics as critique? Of course, critique has never
been free from ethical demands – indeed the problematics that I have brought out here argue for their structural inseparability from critique as a praxis – yet, how does its mobilization through the ethical hail us in certain ways? That is, what could we learn from questioning the epistemic politics of critique through the politics of ethics?

In attempting to trouble the simply repressive, punitive, or even Nietzschean nature of morality, Butler brings in Foucault’s challenge of thinking through “codes of morality, understood as codes of conduct – and not primarily punishment – to consider how subjects are constituted in relation to such codes, which do not altogether rely on the violence of prohibition and its internalizing effects” (GAO 16). In seeking to understand how “a self might take itself to be an object for reflection and cultivation”, does this orientation imply that self-reflexivity, in its critical function, is necessarily moral in nature (GAO 15)? If we take Butler’s conception of morality as “a set of rules and equivalences”, what does that mean for how, as developed here, it seems (primarily?) epistemic in function (GAO 16)? If, as in the late Foucault, “reflexivity emerges in the act of taking up a relation to moral codes, but it does not rely on an account of internalization or of a psychic life more generally, certainly not a reduction of morality to bad conscience”, how might we negotiate reflexivity as a function of critique (GAO 16)? And how might we negotiate impending psychologisms in addressing these problematics?

Given how the logic of psychologisms requires a developmentalist and causal subject – as with Foucault’s concern for “anthropological slumber” or even Schmitt’s concern for the scientificity of the sociological transposition – how does the ethical framing of critique reduce critique to the psychoanalytic (Foucault, “Philosophy and Psychology” 259)? Would a methodological reorientation toward the political, toward negotiation and
strategics, help us to come to varying conclusions that might not end up with a care of the self, as it has been mobilized today? These questions help us to not get entangled in conversations of human nature – whether motivations to do good or fears of punishment/injury need to be calculated. Hence my orientation toward effect, and how logic works through mobilization: mobilizations that could perhaps be productively studied through questions of the subject and how these logical games demand certain desires, anxieties, truths, and so on, to function, blurring analytics of form/substance to insist upon more careful negotiations.

Butler’s concern seems to be with how Foucault’s ethical project reworks his conceptions of the subject and its networks of power/resistance: the shift particularly from his earlier works as taking the subject as an “‘effect’ of discourse” to refining how the “subject forms itself in relation to a set of codes, prescriptions, or norms and does so in ways that not only reveals (a) self-constitution to be a kind of poiesis but (b) establish self-making as part of the broader operation of critique” (GAO 17). But what is the problem with effect, if not contained within causality? Is it not the methodological productivity of logic, of games of logic? Is this shift in Foucault really as significant as it is posited to be? And if not, if the structural problems with which he struggles remain somewhat constant, then what does this mean for the nature and function of his implicated conclusions of care of the self?

Given that this ethical self-making that attracts Butler is not “a radical creation of the self ex nihilio but what he [Foucault] terms a ‘delimit[ing] of the part of the self that will form the object of his moral practice’”, her negotiation of these problematics again seems to be committed to a psychoanalysis that privileges the sacrifices that the human
must make to attain self-knowledge, through critique, and become ethical (GAO 17).

Indeed, the aspirations of her ethical project are grounded in the weaknesses and limits that one must recognize and suffer to negotiate one’s opacity in critical and ethical ways. This orientation seems implicated in a number of the problematics that I have teased apart thus far – from epistemic paranoia to developmentalist perfectibility. Of course, the aporia stands that to acknowledge human fallibility (in the Adornian sense) and the perils of immanence is not to escape it, as Butler reaffirms. So if we are concerned with negotiation, do the methodologies of this negotiation of the aporetic have the potential to reorient our conclusions? What does this mean for our inquiries into the limits of self-understanding required for a ‘critical’ negotiation of these aporias (for Butler’s “critical autonomy”) – for the ‘limits’ of limit-analysis and critique? Perhaps this framing of the problem only exacerbates this methodological trap; perhaps we need to give up limits, because how can limits make sense but only in reference to full mastery? Does taking them as contingent, through their mobilizations, in effect complicate their function?

Provokingly the frontispiece of Butler’s Giving an Account of Oneself, selected drawings of Franz Kafka, brings out a formative anxiety of the questions that she poses, the questions that we pose – a tortured piece of modern angst, the harrow of ontological, spiritual, and theological desolation (refer to appendix two). Perhaps these anxieties could account for the drive toward a care of the self, or more broadly, the refuge of ethics? Motivated through an ensuing concern for the misery, the struggle, and the loneliness of the modern condition, these questions seem captured by the fear of an inescapably individualist finality, rendering life a mere performance. Do they point to performance in a Butlerian sense, or in a desire to lose ourselves in
distractions/abstractions – to lose ourselves in enacting scenes of our desires and anxieties? A squirming until submission? A tormented prisoner or actor (or hunger artist?) in a cage thus materializes, not missing freedom as it never was, maybe not even dissatisfied as there was never loss? Could these aporetic experiences challenge the epistemic politics of lack, as developed here, through critique? These questions of ethics get at the despair and helplessness of an anxious modern subject, lamenting at lament as nothing else seems accessible, seeking redemption from redemption. Locked in immanence, with no openings or closures, this life gives form to the immanent as a strange familiarity, a familiar strangeness. It inspires an existential or theological formalism, a cage as cave with reflections and inflections of hallow rationalities, yet illustrative of nothing. Of everything? A modern existentialism thus takes hold against the backdrops of a (un)robbed individuality through impersonal bureaucracies of governance, of management – yet with the substantial angst as a loss of loss, as an experience of the need for loss, with no origin. Hence the epistemic project that follows, obsessed with endowing meaning, wrapped in perfectibility, isolated toward paranoid schematics of connectivities – connecting everything through struggles with (dis)continuities, a ritualistic structuralism not contained by mere formal unity. These demands on/of the subject, exhausted by this introspective solipsism, impose their supporting epistemic projects onto modern experiences of the ontological, the ethical, and the political.

How does this politics of dissatisfaction, of suffering and lack, of struggle (of agonism?), of the sacrifice of modern angst allow for a modernity of insurance (Kafka’s occupation and preoccupation, perhaps)? How does it allow for an insurance that renders risk mundane, an immanence that makes the transcendental immanent? Is my plea for a
methodological reorientation captured by these anxious aporias, in not striving toward the indestructible?

When I ask for us not to *strive toward* as a methodological orientation, I ask not for presentism but a different form of temporality. The ethical self-making that Butler draws from in Foucault’s care of the self requires a temporality of subject/object relations that demands “the context of a set of norms that precede and exceed the subject” (*GAO* 17). But how could this temporal logic be secured if not through a co-constitutivity that presumes a present that incorporates past/future in its very form? Does Butler’s reworking of this temporal logic not get trapped even further into the philosophy of the subject and its solipsistic immanence? How do the norms that function through “power and recalcitrance, setting the limits to what will be considered to be an intelligible formation of the subject within a given historical scheme of things” further reassert this logic (*GAO* 17)?

If we read Foucault’s later works as no purified departure, no making of the self outside modes of subjectivation, then what does this mobilization of critique, through Butler, implicate?: “[t]he practice of critique then exposes the limits of the historical scheme of things, the epistemological and ontological horizon within which subjects come to be at all. To make oneself in such a way that one exposes those limits is precisely to engage in an aesthetics of the self that maintains a critical relation to existing norms” (*GAO* 17). How does this self-stylization function as an epistemic form of aesthetics, concerned with critical judgments, with the paranoia of exposure and limits as manifestations of human virtue – the beautiful, the ugly, the sublime: a question of meaning and validity. Herein we return to the caveat of decisionism as epistemology, the
same danger that emerges in attempting to make oneself into both subject and object. This decisionism requires a sort of transgression that, Foucault describes, “has its entire space in the line it crosses” in how “transgression incessantly crosses and recrosses a line that closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration, and thus it is made to return once more right to the horizon of the uncrossable….a spiral that no simple infraction can exhaust” (Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression” 73-4). Perhaps we can detect this transgressive nature of decisionism, however qualified, in Foucault’s practices of self-formation, whereby an ethical subject “decides on a certain mode of being that will serve his moral goal” (GAO 18). Or, as perhaps through a formulation typified by his earlier conceptions of power (such as in Discipline and Punish), we can detect this decisionism in relation to disciplinary technologies whereby the subject is interpellated “to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, transform himself” and in his various reworkings of biopower and governmentality (GAO 18). In effect, it might be helpful to read Foucault’s earlier struggles not as a simple neglecting of resistance (or rather, networks of power/resistance), but as a question of how, for example, panoptic self-management could be about negotiation and not self-creation, or more broadly yet, the productivity of the repressive (Foucault, History of Sexuality 95). Foucault’s call to ethical self-making thus seems to privilege different moves of power, caught in the blackmail of individuality and collectivity.

Butler’s psychoanalytic departure elides, in a similar way, these more nuanced relations of individuality and collectivity, such as with the following centralizing question in her inquiries: “[i]f it is really true that we are, as it were, divided, ungrounded, or incoherent from the start, will it be impossible to ground a notion of personal or social
responsibility?” (GAO 19). Butler argues otherwise and proposes “how a theory of subject formation that acknowledges the limits of self-knowledge can serve a conception of ethics and, indeed, responsibility” (GAO 19). But how does this response get caught in the problem of limits previously developed? Indeed, her presuppositions (and Foucault’s) resonate strongly with a Kantian concern for the limits of self-knowledge, and its corresponding ethical imperatives (GAO 19). The resulting “primary condition of unfreedom”, however nuanced through “an enabling and limiting field of constraints” in which “ethical agency” or freedom materializes, implicates a range of problems that rely upon this angst, this lack and suffering as a mode of living to foster critical relations to the norms/exchanges that give us meaning – whether in the Kafkaesque, psychoanalytic, Marxian, Cartesian, or similarly anxious form (GAO 19).

I must then ask, would it then be too quick to deproblematize agency (methodologically?) as simply a matter of negotiation of the stakes of relevant subjects? Would the implications of these methodological reorientations render varying ways of addressing these problematics – not to deny their experience, but to negotiate their mobilizations differently? This concern with agency, such as through the language of choice in Butler or Foucault’s ethical project, brings out the challenge of decisionism, yet again, as a model for the political: a model indebted to particular traditions of subject/object relations, whereby to decide sets up a subject in relation to a (in)direct object, a psychologizing fantasy of relationality. To tie relationality, as Butler suggests, to the subject’s opacity, which incites her/him into morality and reflexivity, seems to imply that if we were not relational beings we would not be opaque, that the external (the exceptional?) nourishes opacity in a way that the self’s relationship to the self, of course a
purified impossibility, would not. This point is not to plunge ourselves into a hypothetical world, as indeed this facile move is all too common in the realm of ethical and political philosophy, but to appreciate how this relational self implicates the other as responsible for its opacity, so that pure immanence would solipsistically ensure a more self-transparent (and critical) relationship to ourselves – a formative desire of the care of the self project? Submitting to the failure of immanence seems as problematic as striving for immanence – hence the dynamics of resistance that I have been elaborating in this essay. To know that immanence is always bound to fail is to deny its aporia, and to approach its various problematics through dyads of solutions and failures.

To privilege opacity (as relationality) as the site of ethical obligations, denotative of Butler’s project, is to seductively fix resistance to self-transparency and self-mastery as the basis for ethics. Perhaps the problematic implications of this move lie precisely therein: that it is a resistance. The political, epistemic, and ethical baggage of resistance, of course, does not require that we resist resistance (how silly!), but it does require that we consider how we mobilize resistance as a practice.

These tensions that mark Butler’s negotiations of Foucault’s critical project are intensified through her appeal to recognition (of a post-Hegelian, psychoanalytic, and ethical form) to establish a social basis for giving an account of oneself, or otherwise put, to found ethics through claims to critique. Butler’s project brings out how these inquiries rely on a sociality of unfreedom, requiring a recognition of “the limits the unconscious imposes on the narrative reconstruction of a life” as the “scene of address” for ethics – a psychoanalysis of the ethical subject (GAO 20-1). This dynamic further entangles these humanist anxieties through Butler’s use of the Adornian human/inhuman distinctions as
an entry point into ethical subjectivity and becoming. This temporality of becoming, of humanness, depends on the epistemic politics of limits that I have been tracing here: to put it otherwise, why must, as Butler strives to establish via Foucault’s critical ethos, “ethics emerge precisely at the limits of our schemes of intelligibility, the site where we ask ourselves what it might mean to continue in a dialogue where no common ground can be assumed, where one is, at it were, at the limits of what one knows yet still under the demand to offer and receive acknowledgements” (GAO 21-2, italics mine)? Why must unknowingness be privileged through an epistemic form of resistance to knowingness? Why must edgework, dependent on finitude and limits, provide the exceptionalism needed for becoming ethical? How is exceptionalism committed to the transcendental in these moves, in a negation of the banality of ethical negotiations? What could this mean for Foucault’s ethics of discomfort and its ensuing critical ethos? Herein lies a significant link between Butler and Foucault’s project:

His point, however, is not only that there is always a relation to such norms, but that any relation to the regime of truth will at the same time be a relation to myself. An operation of critique cannot take place without this reflexive dimension. To call into question a regime of truth, where that regime of truth governs subjectivation, is to call into question the truth of myself and, indeed, to question my ability to tell the truth about myself, to give an account of myself. (GAO 22-3)

But how is this calling into question also indebted to the regime of truth, I must ask? If this self-questioning functions as an ethical consequence for Foucault, what does that mean for the politics of resistance? Is it really, as Foucault argues in “What is Critique?”, “to risk unrecognizability as a subject” (GAO 23)? This also gets at an important methodological point that I have come to struggle with in negotiating the function of psychologisms in these inquiries, and its dividuated and developmentalist
subjects. In this context, I am mostly concerned with the problem of singularity in methodology and historicity, notably as exemplified by the turn to the other in fostering critical ethico-political relations. So I am asking, why must these practices of recognition provide the ‘space’ for norms to be challenged and transformed, for a self-crafting through the other (GAO 22)? As an analytic, how does the other function relative to the collective, notably in thinking through (Foucauldian) critique as an ethos?

Taking norms as the social context for a critical account of oneself, Butler proposes that “[t]heir sociality, however, can be understood neither as a stucturalist totality nor as a transcendent or quasi-transcendent invariability”, so that “certain practices of recognition or, indeed, certain breakdowns in the practice of recognition mark a site of rupture within the horizon of normativity and implicitly call for the institution of new norms, putting into question the giveness of the prevailing normative horizon” (GAO 24). This “critical opening” in the normative horizon begs the question of the temporality of change and the problematic of rupture: when was there ever closure? What sort of temporalized developmentalism is at play here? The functional singularity of the other seems to afflict this logic – is this singularity a form of structuralism, opposing/constituting discreteness, or is it a function of recognition? Butler proposes that perhaps Foucault’s resistance to the other as an analytic could be understood in how “the dyadic scene of self and other cannot describe adequately the social workings of normativity that condition both subject production and intersubjective exchange” (GAO 23). However, these questions seem to invoke a methodological trade-off between the discrete, localized structuralism of singularity (such as through self/other and other points of friction) and the non-discrete structuralism of a more assuming totality whose problem
is one of abstracted topology. Butler suggests that this problem can be addressed by how “the very being of the self is dependent, not just on the existence of the other in its singularity (as Levinas would have it), but also on the social dimension of normativity that governs the scene of recognition” (GAO 23). This method thus evokes non-discrete structuralisms as the context for discrete structuralisms – yet must logic adhere to this temporality? If the other cannot, as Butler proposes, be collapsed into the norms by which recognition is conferred because unrecognizibility would induce crisis in/of the norm, what does this mean for recognition as a critical point of departure for the interrogation of available norms (GAO 24)? Does this not ensure that recognition functions as an affirmation of truth by identifying something previously perceived or realized? This problem seems to come back to the logic of immanence which Foucault’s project encounters in asking “[w]ho can I be, given the regime of truth that determines ontology for me?”; this thus enables Butler’s ethical project in that “[i]n an effort to escape or overcome the terms by which subjectivation takes place, my struggle with norms is my own” (GAO 25). Does this focus on (re)connaisance then work through a humanist alienation, a solipsistic logic that collapses ontology onto politics, however resistant?

If, as Butler attempts to argue through Foucault, this unrecognizability or “impossibility” incites “a critical relation to those norms” so that “[i]n Foucault’s view, this opening calls into question the limits of established regimes of truth, and there a certain risking of the self becomes, he claims, the sign of virtue”, does this approach simply function through claims-based identification (GAO 24-5)? Do these questions of how one comes to be in effect function differently than their opposing question, which Butler offers, of “who are you”?
Butler recognizes this trap in how “the other only appears to me, only functions as an other for me, if there is a frame within which I can see and apprehend the other in her separateness and exteriority....[thus] I am caught up not only in the sphere of normativity but in the problematic of power when I pose the ethical question in its discreteness and simplicity” (GAO 25). This is how Butler proposes the dependency of the ethical sphere upon the social. By interrogating the sociality of the norms by which one recognizes oneself, she concludes that the I is necessarily “dispossessed by the language that I offer” (GAO 26, italics mine). However, this could only be the case if a possessive, purified, unalienated self is presumed as the point of departure. Perhaps her orientation toward “a desire to offer recognition to you”, which motivates these struggles with the social norms that govern us, inevitably gets caught in an epistemic, identity-based politics of (re)connaisance (GAO 26)?

This self-ascribed post-Hegelian attempt to put into effect a recognition – of a form that cannot be unilaterally given/received due to the structural similarity of self/other, finitude/infinity, and so on – therefore seems to reaffirm the sovereign subject that it seeks to challenge through the sameness of reciprocity. This is indeed a Levinasian concern that Butler brings in to challenge the constitutive loss of the process of recognition – of the developmentalism of dialectics? Her reworking of Hegel thus poses Foucault’s question of “[w]hat can I become, given the contemporary order of being...subjected to the power of truth in general and truths in particular?” (GAO 30). Although again there seems to be an epistemic privileging of order as organizational, the historicity of these inquiries, attuned to relations of power/resistance, gets at broader questions of the role of intelligibility and recognition in critique. Yet, whether grounding
the social in the dyad or in a more Hegelian move grounding the dyad in the social, how could these processes, wrapped up in practices of recognition, challenge models of sociality constituted by individualist subjects (*GAO* 32)? By asking (as Butler suggests through Adriana Cavarero’s recognition question) “who are you?” as opposed to Foucault’s “reflexive” question of “what can I become?”, how is one more vulnerable, more reflexive, more subversive than the other, as Butler seems to imply (*GAO* 31)? How is this valour of “vulnerability” in Butler’s ethical project implicated in a politics of exposure? Indeed, the politics of vulnerability seems to be caught in an originary wounded site, in a humanist appeal to life and annihilation through grief and mourning, through the negotiations of our alienated and unalienated selves – realized through a narrow conception of violence, always already a morality. How does this effort to challenge “an interior subject, closed upon myself, solipsistic, posing question of myself alone,...[through the reversal that] I exist in an important sense for you, and by virtue of you” further entrench itself into the philosophy of the subject, with an interchangeable I/You (*GAO* 32)? How does an appeal to the other to make sense of the self not exude an even more insidious form of solipsism? And so I return to the question, does the relational or the intersubjective not afford the same structural function to the subject regardless of its locus as analytics? Butler’s use of Cavarero provides an important caveat to this aporetic tension, however (un)satisfactory is a matter of further consideration:

The ‘you’ comes before the *we*, before the plural *you* and before the *they*. Symptomatically, the ‘you’ is a term that is not at home in modern and contemporary developments of ethics and politics. The ‘you’ is ignored by individualistic doctrines, which are too preoccupied with praising the rights of the *I*, and the ‘you’ is masked by a Kantian form of ethics that is only capable of stating an *I* that addresses itself as a familiar ‘you. Neither does the you find a home in the schools of thought to which individualism is opposed – these schools reveal themselves for the most part to be affected by a moralistic vice, which in
order to avoid falling into decadence of the *I*, avoids the contiguity of the you, and
privileges the collective, plural pronouns. Indeed, many revolutionary movements
(which range from traditional communism to the feminism of sisterhood) seem to
share a curious linguistic code based on the intrinsic morality of pronouns. The *we*
is always positive, the *plural you* is a possible ally, the *they* has the face of an
antagonist, the *I* is unseemly, and the *you* is, of course, superfluous. (*GAO* 32)

If exposure is grounded in a corporealed singularity, as Butler suggests through
Cavarero’s challenge, this “irreducibility of exposure” perhaps functions as that point of
friction, that discrete experience that manifests itself as a failure of structure, which
Caverero describes as both “intimate and anonymous” (*GAO* 34). But what does this
singularity of corporeality denote? Is it too concerned with the (non)narrativizable and
the problem of opacity – singularity as Foucault’s ontology of ourselves? This seems to
imply that substitutability is necessary for recognition (through singularity), and that an
ensuing dispossession occurs through “a sociality that exceeds me” (*GAO* 37). Perhaps
this spatiotemporal logic of (inter)subjectivity links historically and politically to how
people experience these anxieties, but, I would argue, there remain different ways to
understand and engage these processes if we reorient our expectations.

The story of a possessive individualism, of separation and lack as the entry into
morality – indeed, Butler’s claims that “[i]t is only in dispossession that I can and do give
any account of myself” – is only one story among many (*GAO* 37). Yet what might this
story tell us of how we approach critique as a means to freedom? Why should we be
concerned, as Butler urges us, with how “[m]y account of myself is partial, haunted by
that for which I can devise no definitive story” (*GAO* 40)? Or to put it otherwise, that
“[t]here is that in me and of me for which I can give no account....[And if] I find that
despite my best efforts, a certain opacity persist and I cannot make myself fully
accountable to you, is this ethical failure? Or is it a failure that gives rise to another ethical disposition in the place of a full and satisfying notion of narrative accountability?” (GAO 40, italics mine).

Butler’s project for an ethics based on the “partial blindness about ourselves”, based on failure, thus seems to reaffirm the problematic implications of an immanent orientation, of limit-analyses (GAO 41). Is it that this concern with “[s]uspending the demand for self-identity or, more particularly, for complete coherence [that counters] a certain ethical violence, which demands that we manifest and maintain self-identity at all times and require that other do the same” becomes important because it is a dominant story that we are struggling through (GAO 42)? Or, could we reorient these questions while still acknowledging these inheritances? And so we return to the imposing tensions of these aporias of immanence.

In seeking an ethics from this “inevitable ethical failure” (made possible by the limit-analysis of a Foucauldian critical ethos), Butler locates this ethics within “a certain willingness to acknowledge the limits of acknowledgement itself” – a form of recognition based on “epistemic limits” (GAO 42-3). Yet, how does Butler’s qualifier that “to acknowledge one’s own opacity or that of another does not transform opacity into transparency” hold up given these tensions (GAO 42)? Or to put it otherwise, how does knowledge differ from epistemic limits, as she proposes (GAO 43)? Does not this imperative “to experience the very limits of knowing” get caught up in the same Kantian ethical game? This seems increasingly the case in how these discussions get mired in (her) moralized languages that put faith in how this approach is to “constitute a disposition of humility and generosity alike: I will need to be forgiven for what I cannot
have fully known, and I will be under a similar obligation to offer forgiveness to others, who are also constituted in partial opacity to themselves” (*GAO* 42). The politics of forgiveness as previously expounded in the context of limit-analysis does not seem to be able to disavow itself from its necessary subject through assertions/negations of its sovereign status – of the theological, humanist humility for control, order, and the epistemic negotiation of morality. So to push this logic further, is that which one is ‘aware’ of within a realm unaffected by the very same norms as ‘unawareness’?

In situating the *immediate excess* and *opacity* of giving an account of oneself as an inevitable *failure*, as “outside the categories of identity”, as a necessary failure “in order to approach being true”, the aporetic conditions of this project are negated (*GAO* 42). Thus, the Butler/Cavarero question of “who are you”, without expectation of full or final answers, does not structurally change its terms of condition. If anything, You/I becomes even more solipsistic than I/You in desiring to know ourselves cannibalistically through the other via a consequentialist logic. Of course, we need to be cautious not to then negate relationality and revert to a solipsistic, Cartesian questioning of the I in isolation. Indeed, these challenges highlight how it is not about the other, or the exceptional, telling us everything about ourselves, as much as the self, or the norm, cannot fully account for itself.

**Judgment, Death, and Critique: Toward Some Concluding Notes**

These aporetic tensions giving form to practices of critique bring out a telling complicity of desire and recognition in Butler’s ethical project that seeks to found ethical responsiveness in an opaque, limited human subject. Through a Hegelian linking of
desire to recognition whereby a kind of “desire to desire” is fulfilled through the desire to be recognized, Butler’s ethico-political philosophy secures how “desire sets the limits and the conditions for the operation of recognition itself” (GAO 43-4). This problematic privileging of desire as an organizing analytic, psychologized in nature, requires us to think about its complicity with ethics as a legislative system of conduct. Is desire a function of a more pure ‘space’ of intuition which ethics must negotiate? Perhaps this ‘turn’ to ethics is telling as a recovery, a recovery from critiques/resistances of the sovereign subject.

My concern therefore lies in how a disciplinary rejection of ethics as attached to this tradition of the subject incites a ‘return’ to ethics as a site for its resistance. Is it simply because it is ‘easier’ than politics, because we need to morally assuage our souls after the posty attack? Indeed, such a philosophical orientation seems structurally marked by the uneasy humanist alliance of (post-)sovereign subjectivities in the ethical inquiries of a Butlerian nature. So to put the question differently, why does Foucault turn to ethics as an explicit domain of inquiry? And what does this explicit engagement tell us about the implications of our struggles, our conclusions? Was it simply the moral comforts of a dying man, or a cultural response to modernity, to modern spiritual desolation under conditions of stress? To caution against the turn toward a care of the self is not then to extol the virtuous negation of the self; even if the care of the self orientation is not necessarily ontological but a strategic project within modes of subjectivation, it nonetheless seems to bring out how its formative critical ethos is wrapped up in the dangers of the logic of immanence.

The ways in which Foucault expresses critique as an ethos, in effect, implicate
this humanist faith in ethics as a means to disalienate us from our inherent alienation as modern subjects: “I can’t help but dream about a criticism that would try not to judge but bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life...It would multiply not judgments but signs of life” (GAO 44, italics mine). In lamenting the limits of judgment, does the very site of limits become a way to face our demons? Does this site evoke a principle of desire that aspires to actualize critique’s function as separable from judgment? Butler supplements this Foucauldian hope by asking us to “[c]onsider that one way we become responsible and self-knowing is facilitated by a kind of reflection that takes place when judgments are suspended” (GAO 46). This proposition not only conflates responsibility with self-knowledge, but also denies the forms of judgment inherent to critique and reflexivity – how else are we to process our lives and deaths? This demeaning of judgement furthermore implicates a temporal logic of critique, akin to the form of instrumentality that I problematized earlier, rather than allowing for its function as conditioning thought and praxis. Thus my concern here lies with the seduction of these methodologies and their implicated conclusions.

Judgment, in this sense, takes on a negative role, such as through Butler’s proposal that “[c]ondemnation, denunciation, and excoriation work as quick ways to posit an ontological difference between judge and judged, even to purge oneself of another” (GAO 46). But if I were to invoke the early Foucault, could it not also function productively, productively inherent as much as repressively perceived? Why must practices of judgment necessarily work “against self-knowledge, inasmuch as it moralizes a self by disavowing commonality with the judged” (GAO 46)? Why must we cling to Butler’s Foucauldian hope that “[a]lthough self-knowledge is surely limited, that is not a
reason to run against it as a project” (GAO 46)? What happened to the challenge of the “repressive hypothesis” to the functioning of power/resistance, as surely these inquiries into critique and ethics are situated within the domain of power relations? And so I return to wondering about, questioning, where Foucault’s studies take him in these late explorations of ethics, and what we can learn from these struggles.

If, as Butler proposes, self-reflexivity and recognition are essential to ethics, and so critique, why this disavowal of negativity as methodology – is ethics somehow more aligned with certain methodological approaches? Is the critical merely denunciatory in function, or how is it productive (echoing the early Foucault)? Although Butler’s use of the late Foucault seems to want to get at the productivity of power (rather than how she understands his earlier conceptions of resistance), shifting from, for example, confession as extraction to self-verbalization, the turn to self-stylization as an ethico-political practice seems to negate these complexities. Perhaps the very question that motivates both Butler and Foucault’s explorations into critical and reflexive subjectivities – of “[h]ow does it come to be that the human subject makes himself into an object of possible knowledge, through which forms of rationality, through which historical conditions, and finally, at what price?” – fix their methodological commitments within a politics of negativity, loss, and mourning (GAO 120).

In this way, Butler notes how Foucault seems to share a thesis with psychoanalysis in how he negotiates the duality of Man, in how “[s]omething is sacrificed, lost, or at least spent or given up at the moment in which the subject makes himself into an object of possible knowledge. He cannot ‘know’ what is lost through some cognitive means, but he can open up the question of what is lost by exercising the
critical function of thought” (*GAO* 120). If cost is understood via the causality of effect, then critique yet again seems committed to the politics of loss or hiddeness in an epistemic paranoia realized through the methodological negativity of finitude – through a politics of conformity narrowly conceived as submission or suspension with respect to a regime of truth (*GAO* 121-2). We can detect this anxiety for the judgmentality of immanence in how Foucault succumbs to the “parrhesiastic struggle with power” to think through critique, as well as in Butler’s reaffirmation of what is at stake in critique:

> When denunciation works to paralyze and deratify the critical capacities of the subject to whom it is delivered, it undermines or even destroys the very capacities to whom it is delivered, it undermines or even destroys the very capacities that are needed for ethical reflection and conduct, sometimes leading to suicidal conclusions. (*GAO* 126, 49, italics mine)

In ascribing to the critical a denunciatory function, is critique’s mission then oriented toward “the self-reflective deliberations of a subject who stands a chance of acting differently in the future”, as Butler suggests (*GAO* 49)? That is, does critique then function as a deferral into a future? This framing of critique through deferral becomes moreover trapped in a bizarre form of nominalism, for Butler’s concern with effect is at times mediated by claims “in the name of ‘ethics’”, which seem to confuse ethics and ‘ethics’ (*GAO* 46). Although never caught in an easy affirmation or negation of these dynamics, of the humanist aspirations toward “life” that ethics seeks to preserve, these formulations of ethics through critique nonetheless point to where the problem often resides, at the too obvious (to be articulated) or the least obvious (subject to the irrational hypersensitivities of posties, logicians, and company).

In resisting the hypermastery of the sovereign subject through the presumption
that to demand coherent narratives is to demand “a falsification of that life” and “to break with relationality”, Butler ends up privileging the sovereign subject as one constituted without interruptions, fragmentations, violences, openings, and ruptures (GAO 63). Along these lines, Butler proposes that “[i]f violence is the act by which a subject seeks to reinstall its mastery and unity, then nonviolence may well follow from living the persistent challenge to egoic mastery that our obligations to others induce and require” (GAO 64). This politics of rupture, of violence, which Butler draws from, assumes that “we are, from the start, interrupted by alterity”, and thus institutes intersubjectivity as the resistant reverse of the sovereign subject (GAO 64). But I must ask, how is the sovereign subject not subject to the disorders that constitute the intersubjective challenge? Do these models of intersubjectivity, of relationality, then simply seek to fulfill the exceptional analytic? Do they seek the grief, the failure of the sovereign subject, as their operationalizations?

In sum, Butler’s attempts “to reconsider the relationship of ethics to social critique” by struggling with the social and non-narrativizable nature of norms often succumb to the dangers of a Kantian limit-analysis, whether ethically, epistemologically, ontologically, psychoanalytically, or politically (GAO 82). Indeed, these dangers point to the haunting of psychologisms in the politics and analytics of finitude. Despite her qualifications that her psychoanalytic engagements are cautious of their status as a “prehistory of the subject”, always working against causal, chronological, and absolute narrative (re)constructions, always fluid histories, to confront the psychologization of critique through ethics is to question the subject that such critical projects necessitate for these narratives to cohere (GAO 78). Critique as a practice must be historicized in ways
that do not allow it to simply function through Butler’s Foucauldian conviction that “I must be careful to understand the limits of what I can do, the limits that condition any and all such doing. In this sense, I must become critical” (GAO 82). Thus, I am asking that we question the implications of an entry into critique secured through limit-analysis and its ethico-political apparatuses.

By recentring the problem of limitation, the same haunting of the sovereign subject, these efforts to mobilize unknowingness, opacity, and corporeality in effect recentre the problematics that I have been tracing here through the politics of limits, negativity, and finitude. In resistance to the sovereign subject, to Butler’s feared “conceit of a fully transparent self”, the seemingly phenomenological privileging of the body, for instance, sets the corporeal against a purified mind, further reaffirming the subject that it seeks to escape (GAO 83). However inevitable the problem of immanence, Butler’s negotiation of Foucault’s critical project, and her efforts to rethink ethical and political philosophy through critique, often underplays its aporetic conditions – indeed, following through with some of Foucault’s own struggles, intensified throughout his late explorations of care of the self as critical ethos. By urging that “to take responsibility for oneself is to avow the limits of any self-understanding, and to establish these limits not only as a condition for the subject but as a predicament of the human community”, Butler’s notion of responsibility founds itself as an epistemic praxis of the self (GAO 83). Of course, these provocations are not necessarily or exclusively aimed at Butler’s project, but rather I have chosen her writings as a rich and complex site to think through some of the contemporary mobilizations of these difficult and pressing aporetic tensions. Of course, as well, I must question how my own preoccupation with methodology functions
not only as a way to deal with the demands (or blackmail) of epistemology and ontology as competing orientations, but also as its own trump card, as a form of mastery that seeks to trap the epistemology/ontology dilemma in its grip. Perhaps greater attention to the problematic of affect in working through these questions of critique, ethics, and politics could nuance these negotiations of our inheritances in ways that more productively engage the aporais of immanence and their various, conflicting demands upon us.

The haunting of the problematic of the subject, exemplified through Butler’s engagement with the Foucauldian critical project, gets at how a recourse to ethics through such epistemic moralizations effectively denies its aporetic conditions, and thus the challenge of politics, of political negotiation. What is necessarily nonviolent about ethics, but perhaps its effect to assuage our moral souls? How is responsibility linked with agency? How is autonomy linked with critique? How is critique linked with injury? How is vulnerability linked with relationality? How is ethics linked with temporalized becoming and the (in)human? How is critique linked with fallibility? How is fallibility linked with finitude? How is morality linked with truth? How is resistance linked with desubjugation, crisis, and rupture? How is formalism narcissistically delinked from effect? How is accountability linked with morality? How is critique linked with the exceptionality of risk? How is risk linked with the unknown, as if all else were calculable? And how, then, does critique justify? These are the sorts of questions that might help us to historicize the practice of critique: to strip its privileges and subject it to all of the messy histories that make up any practice – political, philosophical, ethical, or otherwise.
CONCLUSION

Emancipations of Critique: Aporias of a Problematic, or the Death of An Innocence?

On the whole, my hope in this essay has been to pose some experimental lines of inquiry that seek to take seriously the aporetic conditions of critique as an emancipatory practice. By starting from its function as a practice – rather than granting it the status of ahistorical or moral gestures aimed at emancipating ourselves from the dogmatic, the unethical, or the incorrect – I have been asking that we think through the politics of critical projects through their histories, subjects, and effects. These questions therefore necessitate that we think through the politics of emancipation itself (in the form of critique’s method, for example) and the histories of these not too virtuous or innocent activities. The particular mobilization of critique that I have been interested in exploring here is one of a Kantian nature, which inspires critique as a form of limit-analysis grounded in the self-reflexivity of a finite human subject. Through these methodological commitments, we are thus compelled to consider the aporias of immanence as informing our attempts at the critical in complex ways.

In this essay, I have taken up this challenge through Foucault’s formulations of a critical ethos. I have asked, as one who struggles with technologies of subjectivation (through the sorts of problems of (un)reason and (dis)order that he poses in his early works such as The Order of Things and History of Madness), how does his own critical project become complicit in the governmentalities that he seeks to resist? And more to the point, how is resistance as an operationalization of critique a governmentality itself? The Kantian problematics of finitude, negativity, and limits, as I argue here, enable critique to assume a governmentality of an immanent subject in ways that Foucault, as I seek to
clarify through Butler’s contemporary mobilizations, reaffirms. I choose these sites, which struggle with the implications of Man’s subjectivity/objectivity of the modern critical project, to get at broader issues of our inheritances in critical political and social thought. This move does not lead to a facile appeal to intellectual or political paralysis, but to a demand for more nuanced negotiations of the aporias of our critical projects, which when denied slip dangerously into forms of epistemic paranoia and moralist developmentalism by which humanist, escapist aspirations for perfection, completion, and fullness take hold.

So what might this methodological reorientation implicate more broadly? It is a challenge to work through a history not founded on a refusal of transcendentality that resists the tyranny of truth and in turn obsesses over the tales that we tell ourselves to make sense of our dividuation from the world…but a history of modulations. It is a challenge to work through a politics not stabilized on identity and its fixed, moralistic claims and aspirations of a sort of modern, secular subjectivity…but a politics grounded in the complexities of strategies. It is a challenge to work through a sociology not bureaucratized through its obsessions with sciences of apparatus and mechanics…but a sociology situated in lived forms of relations. It is a challenge to work through a subjectivity not servicing the conditions of possibilities and ruptures of our dividuation that inevitably become the site of exercises of the self and its solipsistic emancipations…but a subjectivity merely referencing technologies of governance. These moves might allow us to more productively engage our struggles in ways that do not compel us to place the critical as the justificatory practice of our struggles, and to then engage all of the messiness that cannot be captured within the spectrum of the critical and
the dogmatic. They might facilitate us to effectively confront these challenges rather than evade them through identities and claims of a modern subjectivity and its struggles to free itself from its constitutive outsides of transcendental, theological, and likewise dogmatic models of subjectivity and governance. Perhaps if we loosen the grip of this sorrow and its formative appeals to the critical we might be able to engage these challenges.

Let us therefore not lament over the death of Man, Truth, Virtue, and the rest; let us also not celebrate it. Let us confront the mobilizations of these challenges rather than take pity upon our imprisoned modern souls. How much more productive our efforts traditionally deployed via emancipations could be when not escaping into freedoms, into the impossibilities and dangerous utopias of a just world never within our reach. Could we not then more effectively grapple with the realities and struggles of this world? Through these proposed methodological reorientations, I am not declaring the death of the subject; I am not trying to destroy truth or deny ethics. Perhaps all that I have been trying to explore in this essay is the death of an innocence. So what I am asking us to consider, quite simply, is how critique functions as a practice: how it implicates particular methodologies and requires particular subjects for its operationalization. Indeed, I am asking that we give critique a history.
Works Cited


Appendix One

Las Meninas (Diego Velázquez),
as referenced in Foucault's The Order of Things

Appendix Two

Selected Drawings of Franz Kafka, as shown on the frontispiece of Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself*

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