

Thinking the Social in Zarathustra's Shadow
Foucault, Butler, Buber, and the Question of Freedom

by

Christopher Lawrence Nichols
B.A., University of Alberta, 2007

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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I seek to reflect on the question of freedom in modern social thought, drawing primarily from the works of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Martin Buber. These three theorists situate the question of freedom in a post-Nietzschean vector of inquiry, within certain claims with regard to power, the modern self, and the ethical imperatives incumbent upon the human actor. I work through various inflections of freedom present in modern social thought, including conceptualizations of ‘limit-experience,’ ‘care of the self,’ and those suggested by a relational ontology of the subject. I bring Foucault, Butler and Buber into dialogue with one another, to both make a case for the continued importance of the question of freedom today, as well as contribute to its ongoing problematic.

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Introduction

[W]hat is ethics, if not the practice of freedom, the conscious practice of freedom?

- Michel Foucault¹

This postulation of a primary opacity to the self that follows from formative relations has a specific implication for an ethical bearing towards the other.

-Judith Butler²

[W]e begin to recognize the crisis of man as the crisis of what is between man and man.

-Martin Buber³

Consider the landscape of freedom today. In North America and Europe, the celebrations of individuality and social progress permeate politics and consumer culture. Freedom, as a potential to step outside, to go beyond, and to change the world, is trumpeted as the marker of Western civilization. In many ways, contemporary Modern Western society is considered freer than any preceding epoch: borders are increasingly porous, allowing the free flow of people, technology and capital; the increasing legal freedoms of minorities and disadvantaged are reflected in UN declarations and human-rights tribunals; advancements in medicine are freeing us from our bodies, allowing us to live longer and better; never before has there been a higher educated, more healthy, technologically advanced populous than that in which the contemporary modern human resides, and therein lies our freedom.

¹ Michel Foucault, "The Ethic of Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, Paul Rabinow, ed. (New York: The New Press, 1997), 284.

² Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 20.

³ Martin Buber, *Knowledge of Man* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 67.

And yet, this landscape is tinged red on the horizon, and the low rumbling of terror stirs beneath our gaze. The fluidity of people and capital divorces us of our sense of place and community; as legal rights are given lip service, the discourse of freedom is used to institute new racist and neo-colonial doctrines; while modern man becomes 'healthier,' diagnoses of depression continue to skyrocket; never before has there been a more violent, controlled, nihilistic populous than that suffering under the modern banner of freedom.

Thus, the unasked question is reflected in our earnest eyes, which have seen so much catastrophe in the name of freedom: If we are so free today, why do we not feel it? Why must we continually convince ourselves of our freedom?

Indeed, as Butler stresses, within social theory freedom must be thought and rethought today, in order to illuminate how freedom operates with respect to theory and social practice in modern society.⁴ I propose, in this paper, to engage in this process, to think-through freedom, as it has been approached in social thought, to both raise the question of freedom and contribute to its ongoing problematic.

The question of freedom, when asked in earnest by those trying to make sense of the world in which they live, yields fascinating insights into the human condition. Despite (or, perhaps, as a result of) its vicissitudes and apparent antinomies in interpretation, the question of freedom captures the minds of social actors and social theorists alike. As those who attempt to find the *logos* in the social, sociologists rely on freedom as a touchstone for understanding action, motivation, and structural constraint in a given

⁴ Judith Butler, *Frames of War* (New York: Verso, 2009), 105.

social field. In many ways, the undercurrent reads: sociology will lead us to freedom, within ourselves, and in relations with others.

In the pursuit of social inquiry, the significance of freedom as a concept cannot be overlooked or over-exaggerated. It is a signpost for meaning, a justification for action, and a mobilizable force in history, producing effects that, presumably, the sociologist wishes to study. In questioning the social, then, we must question freedom, through multiple trajectories: What does it mean, for the social subjects we investigate, to be free? How, as those who interrogate the social, do social theorists frame their studies through their *own* conceptualization of freedom? More generally, what does it mean to be free, as a state in which we may live, or as a practice within the social world? What is the relation between social thought and freedom?

These are the many ways in which we may ask the question of freedom, a question that is too often hidden within social inquiry, beneath the gaze of the sociological apperception yet, in many ways, *driving* the work itself. My own approach, in this paper, seeks to link freedom within considerations of western modernity. As a discipline that has emerged within modernity, sociology takes the 'modern problem' as a primary valence of inquiry: what is modernity? What is a modern subject? How can modern/non-modern relations be cast?

In attempting to understand the modern project, sociology also seeks to account for itself. Foucault has shown how the rise of modernity is concomitant with the rise of the human sciences, which purport to be part of the progressive history of humanity.

Consider:

The first thing to be observed is that the human sciences did not inherit a certain domain... which it was then their task to elaborate with positive methods and with concepts which had at last become scientific; the eighteenth century did not hand down to them, in the name of man or human nature, a space, circumscribed on the outside but still empty, which it was then their role to cover and analyse.⁵

Modernity, rather than being understood as an historical epoch within a progressive history, must be approached as an attitude, or "mode of relating to contemporary reality,"⁶ that enters the historical stage and produces particular effects. This mode has freedom at its core, and, taken with the rise of philosophical anthropology, which holds the human person as its main subject of concern, it becomes the grounding of my current discussion.

The 20th century has made the question of freedom of the utmost importance. Rose in particular links modernity and freedom, noting that the rise of Western individualism, precipitated by capitalism, makes freedom an important ideal for modern man.⁷ Theorists such as Agamben, Arendt, Foucault, and many others show the violence inherent in the modern mode of being, a mode that *masks* the violence inherent within it. This masking can be conducted through the mobilization of freedom itself as a concept. The modern problem and the question of freedom thus intersect as social inquiry attempts to make sense of contemporary modern society.

⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 344.

⁶ Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1994), 309.

⁷ Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 66. Rose, drawing from Berlin, distinguishes between negative and positive freedom, the former being the freedom to have space to act, without the imposition of the state, and the latter being the impetus to 'make citizens free,' through various state measures. These concepts are similar to the concepts of liberty and emancipation, which I explicate below. I contend that the concepts I employ are more useful precisely to avoid negative and positive antinomies, which seem to elide the fact that *any* understanding of freedom is *productive*, a function of discourse I draw from Foucault.

I arrive at the question of freedom guided by Rorty's problem, presented in earnest: what, if anything, can we *hope for* in the social sciences?⁸ The question of freedom, as a central problem which sociological discourse, as well as Western philosophy in general, seeks to not only diagnose the modern world but indicate how it can change. Social theory takes great pains to define the extent to which modern subjects are socially situated and socially produced. In this way, freedom is seen to be inimical to sociological thought. This is far from the case. Rather, freedom haunts social theory as that which accounts for social change, unexpected results from statistical analyses, as well as the emancipatory potential for social theory itself.

Thus do I instigate my inquiry through the overlapping problematics of freedom, modernity and subjectivity. Conceptualizations of the modern subject mobilize particular vectors of freedom—vectors that remain efficacious in contemporary social thought. I aim, in this paper, to advance an argument through parallel pathways of historical and conceptual logic. What I argue is that social theory must be historically grounded and historically understood—Rousseau, for example, must be understood as responding to and reckoning with the issues of his time, and there is a danger in abstracting from the social time and space in which he writes. Further, however, I argue that the question of freedom can be mapped as following a certain logic within social thought, that loosely but not completely follows a historical timeline. The “not completely” is important to recognize, to avoid the direct causal analysis my discussion may imply. I present modern social theory as moving from understanding freedom as liberty, to freedom as emancipation, to freedom as agency, while emerging in dialogue with each other. These

⁸ This is the question guiding Rorty's essay, “Method, Social Science, and Social Hope,” in *Interpreting Politics*, ed. Micheal T. Gibbons (New York: New York University Press, 1987), 241-259.

three conceptualizations are fundamentally critiqued, however, both logically and historically, within the injunction made by Friedrich Nietzsche in social thought. Though liberty, emancipation and agency are mobilized today in social theory, this, I argue, is to the extent that they *ignore* Nietzsche's injunction. I argue that social theory follows the dual courses of attempting to *understand* modern society, through particular conceptualization of freedom, as well as *producing* the modern subjects through vectors of power, within which freedom plays an integral part. This is an insight given us by Nietzsche, and expanded upon by three theorists that I highlight in particular who take up Nietzsche's mantle in different ways: Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Martin Buber.

The argument I make necessitates understanding social theory as both a social practice *producing* reality, as well as *reflecting* and *describing* modern society. For this paper, I stay imbedded in modern thought, in order to make this argument manageable, and rely on Seidman's distinction between sociological and social theory, privileging the latter. Seidman writes,

Social theories typically take the form of broad social narratives. They relate stories of origin and development, tales of crisis, decline, or progress. Social theories are typically closely connected to contemporary social conflicts and public debates. These narratives aim not only to clarify an event or a social configuration but also to shape its outcome—perhaps by legitimating one outcome or imbuing certain actors, actions, and institutions with historical importance... Social theory relates moral tales that have practical significance; they embody the will to shape history...

Sociological theory, by contrast, intends to uncover a logic of society; it aims to discover the one true vocabulary that mirrors the social universe.⁹

This investigation, as a practice of social theory, works backwards in order to arrive again at its beginning. My original question is quite simply "how does one in social

⁹ Steven Seidman, "The End of Sociological Theory: The Postmodern Hope," in *The Postmodern Turn*, ed. Steven Seidman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 131-132.

theory ask the question of freedom today?" This involves the recognition that how freedom is conceived produces *real effects* in society, that this is not a thought experiment, abstracted from particular place and time. Theoretically, I seek to integrate several approaches to understanding the history of social thought, while basing my discussion on several assumptions: 1) that inquiry into the modern mode of subject-formation is essential in approaches to the question of freedom¹⁰, 2) that though there is no coherent "modernity" we can easily delineate, there is nevertheless a logic to its social practices on which we can comment, and 3) that thinking-through the question of freedom may be understood as a social practice itself, reckoning with current social and political impasses.

Freedom does not have an essence to discover; rather, certain ways of conceiving freedom mobilize certain critiques and modes of investigation into the social realm. However, there is a danger in adopting a purely relativist position vis-à-vis freedom, as if to promote the idea that one needs only to define freedom in a particular way in order to realize it in society. Thus, in seeking to show how the question of freedom has been approached in social inquiry, I propose that there are more productive avenues to explore than others. I limit my gaze to modern society, defined as comprising those social subjects who are distinctly modern, the intricacies of which I seek to systematically discuss below. In trying to understand the modern subject, we must recognize which

¹⁰ This is affirmed by Nietzsche, when he stresses that the modern subject is formed through a particular vector of power: resentment. This is embodied in subjects, and has implications for modern society. Nietzsche asserts that "Men were thought of as 'free' so that they could become *guilty*." (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 64) This is a phrase that will be unpacked as my argument progresses, but nevertheless signposts the intersection of modern subjectivity and modern inflections of freedom.

avenues of exploration have been foreclosed, and further, how we can overcome problematic areas in contemporary thought.

I rely, then, on a lens framed by Foucault, who notes that Modern Man is the product—and agent of actualization—of a particular mode of relationship between power and knowledge.¹¹ Modern social thought, then, has to an extent produced the subjects it wishes to study. In examining particular modern modalities of freedom, and their historical place in modernity, we can simultaneously interrogate social thought conceptually and historically, understanding how the question of freedom is implied in modern subject-formation.

This lens is genealogical to the extent that I recognize theories as being grounded in particular times and places. Foucault writes:

[t]he role of genealogy is to record [modernity's] history: the history of morals, ideals, and metaphysical concepts, the concept of liberty or of the ascetic life; as they stand for the emergence of different interpretations, they must be made to appear as events on the stage of historical process.¹²

Sociology itself must be understood within the historical stage on which it produces effects. Rather than undertaking a conceptual history, therefore, I seek to situate particular understandings of freedom within historical events and show the intersections of theory and history. This conveys an urgency in approaches to the question of freedom today. Indeed, as Rose notes,

¹¹ See, for a good discussion of this, Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Critical Inquiry* 8:4 (1982): 777-795.

¹² Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Interpreting Politics*, ed. Michael T. Gibbons (New York: New York University Press, 1987), 229.

if the human being is always ‘being thought’ and if human practices are inescapably made up in thought, then thought itself can and does play a role in contesting them. To diagnose the historicity of our contemporary ways for thinking and acting is to enhance their contestability, to point to the need for new experiments in thought which can imagine new ways in which we can be and act.¹³

The question of freedom, far from being a heuristic device, a question asked in social *inquiry*, is instead asked as a mode of social *practice*. It has social implications, and is politically mobilizable. This is crucial to recognize, to avoid thinking that social inquiry can endure in a social non-space, abstracted from real events and real people. This means that the question of freedom, for we moderns, not only seeks to account for what we do and how we can be said to be "doing" anything at all, but also for who we are, and how we can overcome ourselves.

The Approach

I first intend to make the argument that social theory must approach the question of freedom in a post-Nietzschean vector of inquiry. This requires discussing pre-Nietzschean inflections of freedom, which I divide into the conceptual arrangements of 1) liberty, 2) emancipation, and 3) agency. I follow this discussion with the argument that Nietzsche himself convincingly critiques these three modalities of freedom, and that social thought must therefore look to those who reckon with Nietzsche yet go beyond him in understanding freedom in modern society. The reason one must “go beyond” Nietzsche is that Nietzsche himself envisions freedom as “limit-experience,” and as constantly seeking the boundaries of the self, embracing the joyous destruction this

¹³ Rose, *Powers of Freedom*, 58-59.

precipitates. The theorists I employ—Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Martin Buber—are somewhat sympathetic to this, while ultimately showing the paucity of such an understanding, engaging in deep reflection on how freedom can then be interrogated today.

Thus, I next engage Foucault, Butler and Buber, showing how they converge with Nietzsche, then diverge in considering the question of freedom. I will highlight the importance of understanding freedom as a social practice, embedded in the particularity of social relations of a given time and place. Foucault in particular imagines freedom as an ethical practice upon oneself. For Foucault, an ethical work upon oneself comes prior to a regard for an other. He provides a subject-centered ethic, which, given the subject's formation through power, is problematic. Though an ethical practice of freedom often regards an other, Foucault stresses that "[c]are for others should not be put before the care of oneself. The care of the self is ethically prior in that the relationship with oneself is ontologically prior."¹⁴ How this is possible, given Foucault's own theorization of the self—its formation through power, or that which is exterior—is a question that must be asked.

Butler is one who confronts this problem directly. In her more recent work, she turns to reflection on the ethical imperatives incumbent on a subject that can never fully know itself, though it desires to, and is continually asked to account for itself in social relations. Thus freedom for Butler is inexorably tied to the other, and the formation of the subject through social relations implies that it is only through the other in which one may come to practice freedom.

¹⁴ Foucault, "The Ethic of Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," 287.

Buber is a compelling supplement to this strain of thought, and I include him to the extent that he theorizes freedom within the regard for an other, as Butler does at times, yet more convincingly theorizes the intersections of ethics and freedom. For Foucault, it is unclear how freedom is ethical when it begins and ends with the self; for Butler, there remains a disjuncture between her theorization of freedom and her reflection on ethics, a disjuncture that must be carefully explained. Buber has a unique contribution to social thought within his understanding of “the between,” the space through which freedom flows in social relations.

A note about why I employ the theorists I do, and who they are. Michel Foucault, born in 1926 in Poitiers, France, and died in 1984 in Paris, is widely regarded as one of the most important thinkers of the 20th century. He is one of the most often-cited social and political theorists today, his oeuvre spanning from the early sixties until the year of his death. Foucault travelled and lectured extensively in his lifetime, from Paris to Tunisia to San Francisco, and continues to heavily influence a vast array of disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, english, history, and political science, among many others. Foucault's work undoubtedly belongs in a central place in the cannon of Western thought, and his contemporary influence outside of the academy is notable, particularly within queer communities.

Judith Butler is currently Maxine Elliott professor of Rhetoric and Comparative Literature at the University of California at Berkley. She was born in 1956 in Cleveland and attended Hebrew school from a young age before being introduced to the works of Hegel, Kant, and the Western intellectual tradition. Her contribution to Western social and political thought is profound and far reaching, and there is no doubt that her work

will continue to be important to academic and non-academic interests alike. The text *Gender Trouble* (1990) in particular has been highly influential in queer communities, and Butler continues to write in the tradition of a public intellectual, influencing contemporary readings of the September 11th attacks, the Iraqi war, and what is ethically incumbent upon states, and the subjects who inhabit them.

Martin Buber was born in 1878 in Vienna, Austria, and died in Jerusalem in 1965. He was born into an Orthodox Jewish family, a tradition from which he broke by studying Western philosophy, encountering Kant and Nietzsche in particular, two theorists who would heavily influence Buber's intellectual growth. Buber diverged from his original interest in Jewish mysticism with his book *I and Thou* (1923), a text introducing the philosophy of dialogue that he would continue to develop until his death more than forty years later. An active Zionist, Buber left Nazi Germany in 1938, where he had been teaching in Frankfurt. He continues to influence many strands of psychology, philosophy and religious studies today, though not to the extent as Foucault and Butler. The importance and singularity of Buber's thought has to an extent been forgotten today, particularly in sociology, something I hope my work will somewhat contribute to rectifying. Thus, the somewhat disjointed chronology in situating Buber after Foucault and Butler, though his work comes prior to theirs.

In this thesis, I draw primarily from the work of Foucault, Butler and Buber for several reasons:

- 1) They are both exemplary and exceptional. As articulators of the question of freedom in contemporary thought, Foucault, Butler and Buber reflect particular trends within social inquiry—Foucault and Butler in particular are two of the most often cited theorists today

in social and political thought. This is a function of not only their exemplary work, but their exceptional work as well, and the depth and breadth of their oeuvres. Buber's thought similarly influences much contemporary thought, though to a lesser degree, the reasons for which will be discussed, particularly in relation to what Buber can then *add* to modes of social thought that have forgotten the importance of his work. At the same time they are oft-cited and their work mobilized in particular political trajectories, however, a systematic and careful understanding of their conceptualizations of freedom, and the intersections of these conceptualizations, is itself lacking. It is this lack I seek to address.

2) They overtly reckon with Nietzsche. Below I discuss the "Nietzschean Moment" in social thought, as it relates to freedom and the modern subject, and I assert that it is essential, when asking the question of freedom today, to reckon with his work. Foucault, Butler, and Buber do just this.

3) They remain embedded in the modern project. In approaching such a multivariate concept as freedom, I remain grounded in modern understandings of freedom, and within the logic of modern thought itself. Foucault, Butler, and Buber do this as well.

4) Freedom is a crucial concept within their works. Foucault, Butler, and Buber, at various times overtly, but, I argue, at nearly every juncture, have the question of freedom driving their work. In attempting to articulate new political possibilities, the hope for true community, potentialities of the self, and the promise of social theory itself, these theorists are practicing the freedom they envision.

These apologies for the structure of my argument and the theories I employ will be developed below, as I convey how my argument will be structured in the different chapters.

In chapter one, “Inflections of freedom and the ‘Nietzschean Moment’,” I highlight three concepts of freedom that have been mobilized in social thought historically: liberty, emancipation, and agency. I dub these three concepts “pre-Nietzschean,” to the extent to which 1) they are best articulated prior to Nietzsche’s injunction in social thought, and 2) though they retain their efficacy today, it is to the extent to which they do not reckon with Nietzsche’s thought. Then, I show how Nietzsche critiques these three positions, for their ahistorical tendencies and refusal to follow the logic of their argument, as well as the logic (or *illogic*) of modern subjectivity itself.

In chapter two, “Convergence and Divergence: Beyond Limit-Experience,” I discuss the extent to which Foucault, Butler and Buber *converge* and *diverge* from Nietzsche’s thought, with respect to the question of freedom. They converge with Nietzsche’s social ontology of the subject, something that disabuses ahistorical conceptions of freedom, and implies a concept of power that is best articulated by Foucault. They converge, as well, within a certain understanding of freedom, understood as limit-experience—to seek the limits of knowledge, probe the limits of normativity, and operate with an open-ended practice of critique as a theoretical endeavour. Foucault, Butler and Buber diverge from Nietzsche, however, in ultimately going beyond limit-experience. They critique this position, and move beyond the assertion of the noble will and escape from society that Nietzsche proposes.

Chapter three, “The Permutations of Self-Care,” moves toward a particular practice of freedom envisioned by Foucault, Butler and Buber, which involves an ethic of self-care. Foucault discusses the difference between the injunction to “know thyself,” as

opposed to “take care of yourself,” discussing the fascinating potential for the latter. In contemporary times, self-care takes the forms of 1) a stylistics of desire, 2) the rethinking of kinship ties, within homosexual affiliation, and 3) gender melancholia. Ultimately, I show how Butler and Buber push the ethic of self-care further, critiquing its self-centered formulation, and hinting at an ethic of freedom that is relational at its core.

The final chapter, “Freedom and the Other: the space of ‘the between’,” brings the question of freedom, understood as a social practice, to a fully relational understanding of the subject. Butler writes of concern for the other as the fulfillment, however temporary, of a relational drive that is at the heart of the subject. She stresses that the primary injurability of the subject, as a condition of its emergence, is the occasion for which a regard for the other is necessitated. Though she is somewhat problematic in relating this to the question of freedom, Buber more convincingly integrates an ethic of concern for an other and the subject’s calling to be free. The reality of “the between”—freedom existing in a social space between persons, not within them—indicates something profound for the modern subject, and has implications for social theory today.

As a concluding remark, I return to the question of freedom and see what, if anything, my discussion has illuminated with regard to this concept, and its particular inflections in modern subjectivity. Though Nietzsche’s theorization seems to foreclose any elements of utopian ideals, as well as the continued relevance of liberty, emancipation, and agency, this may not necessarily be the case; rather, in asking the question of freedom, there may be a way of suffering the contradiction of freedom’s usage in a productive way, continually opening the question, rather than ever seeking to close it.

Indeed, if the ontology of the subject is the *effect* of relations, which are (by definition) social, and freedom is the mode through which new relations are made present, is not an inquiry into freedom at the heart of social thought? It is not merely that the social world is the only *observable* register on which to interrogate the human's relation to being; rather, 'the social' is the stage on which the becoming subject "becomes," the mode through which he/she is literally made real. Thus, an investigation into social reality is neatly redundant, and the production of meaning, which some call freedom, makes our bodies *matter*, to borrow from Butler. The modern subject, in attempting to understand and overcome itself, is always thrown into the world, and thus, we must now throw ourselves into our topic, to see what may emerge, and whether we may end up calling it freedom.

Chapter One—Inflections of Freedom and 'The Nietzschean Moment'

In all practical and especially in political matters we hold human freedom to be a self-evident truth, and it is upon this axiomatic assumption that laws are laid down in human communities, that decisions are taken, that judgments are passed. In all fields of scientific and theoretical endeavor, in the contrary, we proceed according to the no less self-evident truth of nihil ex nihilo, of nihil sine causa, that is, in the assumption that even "our own lives are, in the last analysis, subject to causation"...

-Hanna Arendt¹⁵

Arendt's helpful framing of the problem of freedom points us towards problematizing the theoretician's relation to the so-called layperson in society. In attempting to understand and thus explain the mobilization of freedom in the world, social theory has taken many different forms, from explicit reckoning with freedom as a transcendent ideal, to seemingly nullifying its efficacy within the causal analysis to which Arendt is referring. From understanding freedom as a state in which one lives, to freedom as a future-oriented ideal, the concept of freedom and the capacities of the human subject have been related problems for the theorist of modern society.

Thus, I begin my discussion by looking back, historically and conceptually, to modern conceptualizations of freedom in social thought. Social inquiry, broadly defined as questioning the social reality of the human, has historically mobilized freedom in three particular ways that I discuss: freedom as liberty, freedom as emancipation, and freedom as agency. These three 'inflections' of freedom in social inquiry are grounded in conceptualizations of the subject; they are typologies with different ontological bases and can be understood historically within the works in which they are best expressed as reactions against alternative ways of understanding freedom itself, within particular historical debates.

¹⁵ Hanna Arendt, "What is Freedom?," in *Between Past and Future*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 142.

I call these inflections pre-Nietzschean because 1) they were most systematically expressed prior to the emergence of Nietzsche's thought (particularly liberty and emancipation), 2) though they continue today in many forms, they do not reckon with Nietzsche's injunction into social theory, and 3) Nietzsche himself confronts them directly in his polemic, wishing to go beyond their normative forms. I seek to contextualize the question of freedom in social discourse in order to convey how it has been at the heart of social problematics from before 'sociology' itself was coined as a term. The question of freedom, then, is at the core of Western thought, and the modern subject him/herself. Ultimately, I contend that these 'prior' inflections of freedom are shattered by Nietzsche in three specific ways: in not making *themselves* the subject of their analyses; in their ahistorical understanding of the modern subject; and in the relation they establish between their ontological and epistemological assumptions—what comprises social reality, and what we can know about it.

Liberty

Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains.

Rousseau¹⁶

The concept of liberty, as a particular modality of freedom, must be understood to have emerged in conversation and confrontation with the Christian doctrine of divine right of rule.¹⁷ Originally imagined as a new way of accounting for political rule, liberty assumes the freedom of the human prior to being subsumed under the divine law of sovereign rulers. Locke writes:

¹⁶ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 2.

¹⁷ Note that, in his *Second Treatise on Government* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1960), John Locke is writing to explicitly refute the defense of patriarchy espoused by Sir Robert Filmer, asserting that there is a difference between the authority granted within the family and the authority granted to the ruler of a state.

To understand Political Power right, and derive it from its Original, we must consider what State all Men are naturally in, and that is, a *State of perfect Freedom* to order their Actions, and dispose of their Possessions, and Persons as they think fit, within the bounds of the Law of Nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the Will of any other Man.¹⁸

Liberty, then, is defined by what it is not as well as by what it is. It seeks to assert the freedom of the human as a rational, unencumbered agent, which is the ground on which social inquiry then proceeds. Rather than society being immutable, unquestionable, and formed by divine dictate, it is the product of the consent of free people.¹⁹

Liberty is something possessed by the subject, prior to its placement in social relations and politics. Particularly, the logic of the social contract situates humans in a state of nature, in which liberty is possessed, the formation of the social body arriving through conscious, reasonable negotiation. The human is a reasonable animal who enters into contracts through the recognition that his freedom is better served and more fully realized within social relations. Liberal thought, therefore, prizes freedom as inalienable right, based on social contract logic and "prior man" who is born free.

Freedom as liberty, and its mobilization in social thought, is exemplified in Rousseau. As an exemplar of the liberal strain of social understanding, Rousseau's position is overtly presented in the oft-quoted phrase "Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains."²⁰ The liberty of the social subject, in this understanding, comes prior to the social reality. Further, we see, in Rousseau's work, how conceiving of liberty has a direct influence on the social imaginary:

¹⁸ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 309.

¹⁹ I employ the sexist term "man" in this paper often, because the theorists from which I draw use it almost exclusively, with the exception of Butler. I hope I can be forgiven for this move, as rendering all sexist language into non-sexist form may be as problematic as not, and I attempt to stay true to the theorists I employ.

²⁰ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 2.

[T]he civil association is the most voluntary act in the world; every man having been born free and master of himself, no one else may under any pretext whatever subject him without his consent. To assert that the son of a slave is born a slave is to assert that he is not born a man.²¹

To begin with the assumption that society is formed through the consent of free, rational men has many implications for social thought.²² Rousseau, through his grounding in liberty, is able to critique modern society for not actualizing the freedom of the individual. Thus, the chains of the modern human must be unlocked, and true democracy becomes the aim of Rousseau's social problematization. If man is born free, society must reflect the freedom through which the primary, rational foundation of the social is formed. If it does not, it signifies a decaying civilization. The ideal, 'prior' man, who is free, becomes the normative lens through which to instigate social inquiry. Though Rousseau stresses that the social body adopts a "general will," through which individual wills are best expressed, the primary social move remains close to the heart of his analysis. A properly running, engaged, and healthy society makes people freer than if they were to maintain freedom outside of society; however, this is only because individual interests are better met when people act collectively, rather than alone.

For Rousseau, society is *defined as agreement itself*, between rational individuals. Thus, society is a tenuous body, dissolving and reforming based on the dissent of members. Dissent yields a new society, based on new agreements; thus, Rousseau's concept of social change, embodied in the potential of free humans. "The social" only exists (or ought to only exist) to the extent that it provides an articulation of the wishes of rational, free people. Thus, the assumption that society exists out of divine providence is

²¹ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 126.

²² The fact that it is only men, and not women, who enter into this primary 'social' move, is an obvious ground for critique of this position. This is a critique outside the purview of this paper, however.

critiqued; change must occur if the needs and wishes of people are not being met. These changes must express themselves in a coherent articulation of the general consensus of rational individuals.

Thus, we begin to see the importance of law within the concept of liberty. The legal-judicial rights of the subject are instantiated through law, to ensure the liberty of the subject in society, and to ‘recognize’ the freedom inherent within the individual. Proper governance, through the debate and legislation of law, becomes the capturing frame of liberty, as individual freedoms must be properly recognized and maintained within a functioning society. The juridical branch of government has an important role as well, interpreting laws and ensuring they are meted out fairly amongst all members of society.

I reflect on the conceptualization of liberty in Rousseau because it is overtly presented at the core of his thought, and the implications for his understanding of the free human for social theory are clearly evident. There is much social inquiry that relies on liberty, however. Typically, the doctrine of the free, rational subjects finds more traction in political theory today. Within sociological work, liberty has been critiqued and largely replaced by the concept of emancipation, which I turn to now.

Emancipation

Metaphorically, freedom in its essence is the acceptance of the chains which suit you and for which you are suited.

Malinowski²³

In the conceptualization of freedom articulated as liberty, society is defined in reference to solitary man, and exists to the extent that it provides avenues through which

²³ Bronislaw Malinowski, *Freedom and Civilization* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), 242.

the freedom of humans is best realized. Emancipation, though holding to a particular understanding of the human as well, significantly diverges from liberty. Further, as evidenced by the above quotation, emancipation can be understood in direct tension with liberty. Emerging most systematically in modern thought in the middle of the 19th century, emancipation as a modality of freedom can be seen to be in dialogue with liberty.

The assumptions undergirding emancipation posit that society is not simply the product of agreement of rational actors, but *sui generis* and prior to individuality itself. The assertion of a prior social body means that freedom can only be understood as embedded within social relations. Man can be *made free*, if certain social relations are present.

Freedom as emancipation is most systematically explored in the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski's work. He is important to explore because of his recognition of freedom as an essential concept within social thought. In fact, Malinowski notes that "[t]he fundamental problems of ethics, sociology, and psychology revolve around this concept."²⁴ Further, Malinowski overtly addresses Rousseau's understanding of liberty, so it will be instructive to see how liberty and emancipation relate to one another. Malinowski writes that "[f]reedom is an attribute of organized and instrumentally implemented phases of human action."²⁵ The organization and implementation of action occurs through social means; therefore, freedom is socially produced and socially realized.

²⁴ Malinowski, *Freedom and Civilization*, 44.

²⁵ Malinowski, *Freedom and Civilization*, 24.

A conceptualization of a subject that is made free through cultural means has implications for the trajectories through which social inquiry progresses. In seeing free society as that through which one's human nature is realized, Malinowski exemplifies a vast literature in social thought that sees the human emancipated through social means. Social critique takes the form of highlighting the extent to which human nature is not realized through social relations; a typification of this is the concept of alienation in Marx. For Marx, the human is alienated through the material relations necessitated by the capitalist mode of production; only when this is overcome, through revolution, will one be free to exercise his/her own species being, existing in a relation to the products of his/her labour that accurately realizes his/her humanity. Alienation thus conceptually requires a natural human which can be shackled or freed through social means. If it is natural that the human "objectifies" him/herself, in material things in the world, and if these objects themselves alienate the human, society is exploitative. Conversely, if social forces are in concord with one's essential self, society actualizes a state of freedom.

Thus do we see the possibility for society to emancipate the individual, to be the tool through which the human becomes free. This is contingent on society, and defined within specific cultural milieus. In works as diverse as Malinowski and Marx, freedom is realized through social and cultural means; by implication, the individual cannot be understood as free, apart from society. In direct reference to Rousseau and liberty, Malinowski stresses that "[n]either ontogenetically nor phylogenetically is 'man born free.'" Rather, one is already thrown into the world, socially conditioned and produced. Further, a conceptualization of emancipation seeks to attack the abstract theorizing engendered by rumination on liberty. No where does one live in a prior, rational state

where society is not yet formed; rather, one is always present in the social relations of a particular time and place.

And yet, there is a parallel concern for the institution of law within liberty and emancipation. With respect to the primacy of law, proponents of emancipation would seek to find the proper laws that would, far from granting space for free men and women, enable men and women to actualize freedom in a social space. Indeed, as Ritzer notes, sociologists using emancipation as a concept see freedom "as external control over [individuals'] passions."²⁶ As opposed to the liberal emphasis on law as the securing of space through which freedom may be exercised, laws are enacted to realize freedom, to help the human "realize" him/herself.

This understanding of emancipation, emerging in dialogue with liberty, avoids the liberal/conservative opposition often posited as way to understand the difference between these two schools of thought. Dubbing the tradition Comte and, following him, Durkheim, founded as "conservatism"²⁷ implies a particular understanding of freedom which these theorists themselves did not hold. Rather than understanding their position as advocating a check on freedom (or, more accurately, liberty) a more nuanced reading would reveal a different kind of freedom rather than a foreclosure of freedom itself. The point is not that conceptualizations of emancipation seek to show that human are not free, but rather that they are only made free through social processes. The difference is important to note.

²⁶ George Ritzer, *Classical Sociological Theory*, 3rd ed. (United States: McGraw-Hill, 1996), 204.

²⁷ Ritzer does this, on page 17 of *Classical Sociological Theory*, and he is exemplary of this trend.

Agency

A social relationship, even when it is a matter of a so-called 'social system' ...consists purely and exclusively in the possibility that someone has acted, is acting or will act in such a way that one agent's meaning varies in relation to another's in a specifiable way

Weber²⁸

The third inflection of freedom—what I call agency—can be seen to arise within the interpretivist school of social thought, in dialogue with liberty and emancipation, espousing a different conceptualization of the subject. This modality of freedom ascribes to the human the ability to "step outside" of social relations and create meaning, which is then studied by the social theorist. Rather than asserting freedom as a reality prior to the social, or actualized within the social, agency would seek to describe the extent to which the individual produces social effects, which can then be studied objectively.

Weber is the exemplar of this strain of thought, within his descriptive sociological work, in which he seeks to account for action in society. In "The Nature of Social Action", Weber describes sociology as "the science whose object is to interpret the meaning of social action."²⁹ Action is broadly linked to meaning, rationality, and other actors in society, and Weber writes to specifically refute the thesis that social structure can be understood divorced from its influence on individuals' lives.

Whereas liberty attempts to provide a different origin story to society, which would give rise to a different politics, agency seeks to be descriptive within society, to understand the ability to create meaning in individuals. Both, however, rely on the rational social actor. Weber writes:

²⁸ Max Weber, "The Nature of Social Action," in *Weber: Selections in Translation*, W. G. Runciman ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 30.

²⁹ Weber, "The Nature of Social Action," 7.

When we adopt the kind of scientific procedure which involves the construction of *types*, we can investigate and make fully comprehensible all those irrational, affectively determined, patterns of meaning which influence action, by representing them as 'deviations' from a pure type of the action as it would be if it proceeded in a rationally purposive way.³⁰

Thus agency privileges the rational, meaning-making individual, heuristically ascribing to the subject the capacity to be fully accountable for his/her actions, then instigating social inquiry based on these assumptions.

The concept of agency has implications for the form and substance of social critique by the theorist. An understanding of agency would seek to disabuse the notion that social relations—society itself—can emancipate individuals. Whereas Malinowski situates freedom in the capacity for culture to organize and dictate human action, Weber would indicate the opposite: that it is the rational individual who creates, dictates, and, in a limited sense, exercises freedom in society. The “agent” in society is either the repository and originator of meaning, which produces social effects, or frustrated in his ability to act by social restraints. In either case, agency occurs in a non-social space, whether frustrated by social realities or enabled.³¹

This may seem to suggest that the subject mobilized in agency is synonymous as that within conceptualizations of liberty. However, agency needs to be differentiated from liberty, both conceptually and historically because it doesn't rely on a prior subject, who is born free, and therefore the moralist underpinning of liberty is not as present. In its place is a reliance on objectivity. Conceptually, mobilizations of agency rely on the rationality of the subject, on its intentionality in the formation of meaning. Agency is

³⁰ Weber, “The Nature of Social Action,” 9.

³¹ This is a point made by Butler in *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 175.

typified in the social subject's ability to *act* unexpectedly. It appears in descriptive social inquiry, as well as interpretivist positions that emphasize the individual's place outside of social conditioning. There is a quality of the human that stands outside of society that produces social effects. Thus, an investigation that uses agency as a conceptual tool seeks to study subjective positions of social actors objectively. It attempts to apprehend freedom as human action that is non-social, yet productive of the social. The human is the object of study, and the way he or she creates reality, producing effects, is the subject of analysis in social thought. Many counterpose structure to agency, which may be a recasting of the emancipation-agency conceptualizations which I offer here. What structure implies, however, is the absence of freedom, rather than a different modality of freedom, with a different subject underneath.

Agency appears in descriptive writing, which assumes a social field, then attempts to account for everything within it. Agency, then, is part of the totality of meaning, one cog in the feedback loop of agent—meaning-transmission—structure (social field)—dissemination—agent. The agency of the human is a vehicle through which social theory understands social change; the fact that humans *produce effects* is leaned upon, as a descriptive tool. Thus, the social imaginary expands through a mobilization of agency, to allow social theory to understand the actions of individuals in social relations, as rational subjects.

We see the three inflections I have highlighted, in their idealized forms, as having the modern subject at their base. In liberty, the human is prior to the social; in emancipation, the human is realized through the social; in agency, the human is outside the social in some capacity. These three anthropological vectors mobilize freedom with

certain implications for social thought, and society in general. Though the theorists I examine as exemplars of their respective conceptualizations of freedom are all long deceased, the concepts they explore have retained much of their efficacy today in contemporary theory, and I leave it to the reader to see liberty, emancipation and agency in their current manifestations. What must be stressed is the relation between a theoretical reliance on a particular concept of freedom, and the implications this has for how society, social change, and the human person are understood, though often this goes unacknowledged. I move now to one who critiques liberty, emancipation and agency on multiple levels: Friedrich Nietzsche.

The Nietzschean Moment

Whomever you do not teach to fly, teach him for me—to fall faster!

Nietzsche³²

In conducting a conceptual exegesis of freedom in social inquiry, the paucity of discussion and overt reckoning with this concept must be stressed. Liberty, emancipation, and agency mobilize social inquiry, yet are concealed, often through the supposedly objective lens adopted within sociological work. Further, mobilizations of these inflections of freedom are lacking the historical scope I have attempted to provide here. Rather than understanding particular freedoms to be emerging historically, in conversation with contemporary social crises and contradictory positions, liberty, emancipation, and agency are adopted to advance theoretical arguments, as if social theory itself did not exist *in society*.

I have attempted to this point to present conceptualizations of freedom as emerging within a particular socio-historical timeline; liberty, emancipation and agency

³² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2005), 182.

exist in tension and conversation with each other, within the modern story itself. The three modalities of freedom outlined above mobilize social theory in different ways. I turn now to one who *immobilizes* these modalities, and shows the decaying moral impetus behind social-scientific efforts reflected in these respective conceptualizations. Nietzsche highlights the stagnation that has occurred in modern social thought; it is only through precipitating the fall of morality, the descent into unfreedom actualized through critiquing modern thought itself, that we may learn to fly again, in the future. To precipitate the fall is to critique—to smash the idols of the modern project; to fly is to move toward a new, positive freedom, one that has new implications for the social imaginary.

Linked to the aforementioned critique, Nietzsche forces us to ask when *descriptive* sociology (as sociology often purports to be) becomes *proscriptive* (inculcating a particular notion of freedom and morality). Nietzsche shows us how easy this move is made, and how modern understandings of freedom allow for the entrance of morality through the backdoor. Far from providing a historically causal analysis of the emergence of the modern subject, Nietzsche nevertheless shows the continuity of thought reflected within liberty, emancipation and agency. The continual and insistent presence of these concepts indicates a weary soul, one that continues to will, within the unacknowledged eclipse of a particular logic inherent in modern social thought, which would foreclose the above conceptualizations.

Nietzsche performs an exegesis of the modern soul, noting that the modern philosopher and social theorist has not yet taken *himself* as an object of inquiry. What this implies is situating the modern philosopher in the modern world, through social, rather

than metaphysical, inquiry—the philosopher cannot stand outside his/her social milieu. The contemporary philosopher is thus a social theorist—embedded within social relations, while simultaneously defining and shaping them. The proponents of liberty, emancipation, and agency are seeking to account for modern society and how it can change. Nietzsche takes modern man as the subject of his scrutiny, and is pessimistic that the modern era has made us any more free; rather, modernity carries the promise of the slaves, a great leveling of greatness—a descent into unfreedom.

Raising Nietzsche's contribution to social theory and the question of freedom is cause for another thesis in itself. However, I seek to mobilize his thought toward two conclusions, which progress my argument: 1) that Nietzsche convincingly critiques the conceptualizations of freedom previously outlined—liberty, emancipation, and agency—and 2) that, in asking the question of freedom, we must look to those who reckon with his thought, yet *go beyond* Nietzsche's own conceptualization of freedom. I advance the former argument now, and reserve the latter for the next chapter.

Nietzsche begins his text *On the Genealogy of Morals* by explicitly taking aim at his contemporary modern theorists: "We are unknown to ourselves, we men of knowledge."³³ How, specifically, are these men of knowledge unknown to themselves? For Nietzsche, it is precisely through their lack of consideration for what has historically conditioned them to think the way they do. The ahistorical scope espoused within modern theory is the cause of Nietzsche's unrest, and I link this specifically to conceptualizations of freedom.

³³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 15.

Recognizing that modern inflections of freedom emerge out of critique of Christian absolutism, Nietzsche labors to show the *continuity* of thought between modern and Christian freedom. With the decline of the universal Christian meta-narrative—the death of God, in Nietzsche’s words—a vacuum of morality is created that must be filled. The truly despicable fact is that, in midst of the eclipse of God, modern man reaches for other “gods” to fill His place. Nietzsche has contempt for the willful ignorance of the modern subject, who knows that it is indecent to speak in terms of transcendent truth, yet continues to do so: “Everyone knows this: *and everyone none the less remains unchanged.*”³⁴ In refusing to realize the consequences of his attack on Christianity, the modern social theorist thus proposes alternative notions of the subject and of freedom, to have God return in a new form.

Nietzsche can be seen to critique liberty, emancipation, and agency, in their own right, for this rearticulation of universalist concepts. He attacks liberty specifically when deriding the “the boorish simplicity of this celebrated concept of ‘free will.’”³⁵ The notion of a free subject, who exists prior to social effects and applies to every person, is a fallacy of a malicious sort because, in its simplicity, it masks its great leveling instinct, and makes an apology for the laws that enslave humans. For Nietzsche, to ascribe a pristine notion of the subject to every person, and to have it form the base of social theory, is to neglect the real differences in people, in terms of their disproportionate strengths and wills. It also constructs society within the logic of the social contract, of which Nietzsche is dismissive; in Zarathustra’s words:

³⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 2003), 162.

³⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 2000), 219.

Human society: this is an experiment, thus I teach—a lengthy searching: but the search is for commanders!—

—an experiment, O my brothers! And *not* a ‘contract’! Shatter, shatter for me such words of the soft-hearted and half-and-halfers!³⁶

Nietzsche invites us to think that liberty was invented as a way to *punish*, through the instantiation of law, rather than as an act of recognition of primary freedom. In considering how best to maintain the rights of individuals, the mobilization of liberty in fact restricts the drives that seek to have some lives dominate others. Laws that guarantee freedom make subjects wary of themselves, held up to external criteria through which to judge their own actions.³⁷

Nietzsche targets the mobilization of the concept of emancipation when critiquing the teleological impulse of the modern sciences: "A little *more* strength, flight, courage, and artistic power, and they would want to *rise*—not return!"³⁸ The positivist thrust is seen as an attempt to emancipate humanity, to overcome life, and to reach an end of history that is unattainable. The positing of an essential human, who can be realized through social means, is the vehicle through which emancipation purports to discover the truth of the human condition. Conversely, Nietzsche writes, "What alone can *our* teaching be?—That no one *gives* a human being his qualities: not God, not society, not his parents or ancestors, not *he himself*...*No one* is accountable for existing at all..."³⁹ In making nothing accountable for existence, Nietzsche insists therefore that we *construct* rather than uncover the forms of life that are used to explain contemporary society. Any

³⁶ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 185.

³⁷ Freud takes this critique of the civilizationalizing impulse of modernity and explores how it contributes to the formation of the ego within subjects. See, for example, *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), in which Nietzsche's influence on Freud is abundantly clear.

³⁸ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 207.

³⁹ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 65.

sort of social scientific work that purports to be emancipating humanity is merely enslaving it through a new means.

The implications for utopian dreams are clear, as, for Nietzsche, "*Différence engendre haine*."⁴⁰ Attempts to collectivize, to reach common grounds, or to achieve equality among peoples is antithetical to the will to power, which is what powers life. Communitarianism and socialism are dreams of the commoner, for whom Nietzsche has nothing but disdain. Any attempt to mitigate the competitive wills that exist within humans leashes the truly great in society, those who are able to take what they want, to impose their will on others, and to create the world in their image. The communal impulse is a lie invented by the weak, in order to subordinate the strong, and this is mobilized within the impulse to emancipate the human.

The concept of agency is similarly derided:

‘Everything is subjective,’ you say; but even this is interpretation. The ‘subject’ is not something given, it is something added and invented and projected behind what there is.—Finally, is it necessary to posit an interpreter behind the interpretation? Even this is invention, hypothesis.⁴¹

For Nietzsche, social inquiry cannot presume to be value-free, or descriptive. It is value-laden, and as it ‘proposes’ and describes, it affects, wills, and destroys. Further, “there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything.”⁴² The ascription of agency in descriptive sociology attempts to investigate the actions which produce effects in the world through emphasis on the actor, rather than the action itself. In the effort to describe agency, the agent is granted abilities that neglect the extent to which actions are conditioned by the social

⁴⁰ “Difference engenders hatred.” Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 403.

⁴¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 267.

⁴² Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 45.

interiority of the subject. Nietzsche stresses that there is no inside/outside dichotomy that the subject lives. Consciousness itself is the product of social forces. The simplistic assertion of personal responsibility, outside of any historical contingency (i.e. prior, self-contained man) is merely an attempt “to pull oneself up into existence by the hair, out of the swamps of nothingness.”⁴³

The Social Subject

Our body is but a social structure composed of many souls.

Nietzsche⁴⁴

Nietzsche provides a compelling argument for the historicization of the subject. This argument is made beyond the causal analysis held in much social scientific work, that humans are socially produced and therefore predictable, held up to social scientific laws that need to be discovered. Indeed, in this social scientific work, “one tries to find in events an old-fashioned divine governance—an order of things that rewards, punishes, educates, and betters.”⁴⁵ Conversely, Nietzsche asserts the fundamental disharmony between forces, reducing life to a contestation of wills and the prevalence of disorder, despite what conceptual frame is applied to it. In attacking the attempt to order and classify society, Nietzsche imagines a non-teleological freedom, with the problem of the subject—the question of the human being—at its core.

Modern man is a particular human who enters the historical stage with effects working on him: “Thus the body goes through history, becoming and fighting. And the spirit—what is that to the body? The herald, comrade, and echo of its conflicts and

⁴³ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 218.

⁴⁴ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 216.

⁴⁵ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 21.

victories.”⁴⁶ Thus, if social inquiry is to have any efficacy, it must seek to uncover the contingency of all things, including the body, and consciousness itself. The modern subject has internalized the previously external feature of guilt, originally present within a creditor-debtor relationship but now manifest in bad conscience, the self-doubt and moral questioning that frustrates the ability to assert oneself in and on the world. The deployment of particular expressions of freedom is itself one mode through which the modern subject enslaves him/herself.

Ultimately, Nietzsche’s interjection stresses that modernity must recognize the logical conclusions of its own thought. In critiquing the transcendent law as given by an otherworldly being—producing the death of God—modern thought nevertheless has held to certain transcendent or ahistorical values, chief among them the prior human of liberty, or the human nature which can be emancipated. In other veins, modern social science has attempted to become purely descriptive, ascribing agency as a heuristic tool. Thus liberty, emancipation, and agency follow the same nihilistic logic; nihilism is “the logical conclusion of our values.”⁴⁷

The Nietzschean moment in social thought cannot be ignored. Nietzsche convincingly and compellingly argues that if we are to speak of freedom in social inquiry, there are certain things we *cannot* consider. We cannot hold to a transcendent notion of the subject, we cannot consider ourselves thinking in a social non-space, abstracted from the world, and, relatedly, we cannot divorce the ontology of freedom from its epistemological valences (what we can know about it). The “being” of freedom, and the “doing” of freedom are synonymous.

⁴⁶ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 65-66.

⁴⁷ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 4.

The question remains: is freedom something to be relegated to the scrap heap of social thought today? If so, the question itself has no efficacy today. If not, however, we need to regard those who ask the question of freedom in new ways, reflecting new modes of relation to the subject. We may begin with Nietzsche himself, who sees the potential for a new human, one who is radically free, imposing himself on the world. What implications does this have for social theory? What would it mean to “become who we are,” as Zarathustra implores us?⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 208.

Chapter Two—Convergence and Divergence Beyond Limit-Experience

[W]e had to forget everything we imagined we knew...and were plunged into the night.

Buber⁴⁹

In the previous chapter, I attempted to show how particular inflections of freedom are mobilized in social theory, and how these inflections are significantly problematized by Nietzsche's injunction, both historically and conceptually. The following discussion will 1) outline the extent to which Foucault, Butler and Buber converge with Nietzsche, particularly with regard to theories of power and subjectivity, 2) show a similar convergence with regard to Nietzsche's account of freedom, understood within the pursuit of limit-experience and 3) finally, begin to show Foucault, Butler, and Buber's significant divergence from Nietzsche's thought, as they stretch freedom beyond Nietzsche's reductive rendering.

I seek, in this chapter, to present the degree to which Foucault, Butler, and Buber coalesce within understandings of the constitution of the modern subject. While the preoccupations of these theorists have important and essential differences, the similarities are striking and instructive. Convergence with Nietzsche, the main touchstone for this similarity, can be apprehended through a broad understanding of power, most thoroughly articulated by Foucault. As such, Foucault will be foregrounded in this discussion, and Butler and Buber included to the extent that they echo Foucault, fleshing out theorizations of normativity and relational modes of being in particular, within a Nietzschean lineage. What is important to stress, from the beginning, is the extent to which this discussion relates to the question of freedom. What must be demonstrated is

⁴⁹ Martin Buber, "Dialogue," in *Between Man and Man* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), 17.

Foucault, Butler, and Buber's convergence with Nietzsche, their common critique of the pre-Nietzschean freedoms previously discussed, and their reckoning with his social ontology of the subject. This lays the groundwork for the extent Foucault, Butler and Buber overcome Nietzsche, with regard to the question of freedom itself.

Within the Nietzschean injunction to “become what one is” is the call to recognize oneself as a subject. To be "subjected" to power's effects is the ontological condition of one's appearance in the social world. The process of subjection, therefore, is not something one can step outside of—we *are* modern subjects, and as we take the modern subject as the ground for our analysis, we simultaneously *produce* the modern mode of thought we are attempting to think-through. The paradox of this configuration must be carefully considered, particularly as it relates to the question of freedom. The subject is always becoming itself, not statically itself. It exists in a particular time and place, constantly navigating the conditions of its emergence in the world. If it is the case that modern thought is continually produced as it is reckoned with, the question of freedom asks how our mode of thought can change, why it should change, and what may be the effects of this change.

Convergence

The body—and everything that touches it: diet, climate and soul—is the domain of the Herkunft. The body manifests the stigma of past experience and also gives rise to desires, failings and errors...The body is the inscribed surface of events.

Foucault⁵⁰

Nietzsche writes a lengthy and fundamental post-script to "the knowable." He shows us the tombs of ahistorical knowledge and transcendent freedom, and the lingering

⁵⁰ Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Interpreting Politics*, Micheal Gibbons ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1987), 227.

vestiges of this thought for what they are: an epitaph, though one not yet self-aware, and one that continues to be written. Foucault reads Nietzsche as "an invitation to call in to question the category of the 'subject,' its primacy and its originating function."⁵¹ By instigating this "turn" away from a primordial self, Nietzsche's work heralds a new mode of social inquiry that rigorously questions the manner through which truth adopts a self-evident character in the present. Foucault deepens and fleshes out this trajectory of thought.

Foucault rebrands Nietzsche's critique of transcendent, ahistorical freedom, using a more systematic historical approach and complex relation between freedom and power. What he is at pains to prove is the extent to which freedom cannot be understood as *opposed* to power, as if power is something to escape, as if there is a place in which it does not exist. By power, Foucault means something quite complex, yet basic—something difficult or impossible to observe, but whose effects are everywhere. Power for Foucault means social relations, which, through their relation, cause effects within the social world. These relations are often attributed to be discourses, or particular modes of language transmission that make some things intelligible in human beings and others not. Foucault hints at much more than this, however.

Foucault notes that 'discourse' as it is generally understood falls short in theorizing power. Instead, "[d]iscursive practices are not purely and simply modes of manufacture of discourse. They take shape in technical ensembles, in institutions, in behavioral schemes, in types of transmission, and dissemination, in pedagogical forms

⁵¹ Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx* (New York: Semiotext, 1991), 46.

that both impose and maintain them."⁵² Discursive practice, as a concept, seeks to acknowledge a more fluid and socially embedded understanding of power. Power takes physical form in techniques, imprints itself on subjectivity, circumscribing how a subject speaks, how it is heard, and how it is seen. If discourse seeks to delineate what is said and how it is said, discursive practices examine this and more, recognizing power as having multiple trajectories, technical effects, and habituated social forms.⁵³

While Nietzsche conveys a certain incredulity when noting that modern philosophy has not realized the fallacy of its own logic of criticism, refusing to take itself as an object of its critique, Foucault accounts for this more convincingly, by noting what effects are produced by a certain mode of inquiry into society, embodied in particular discursive practices. Foucault highlights the specific modes through which knowledge is made apparent and unquestionable in modern discourse. Three of these modes I relate to the aforementioned pre-Nietzschean freedoms. The three vectors of liberty, emancipation and agency are shown to be productive of particular modern subjectivities, which overlap at times but nevertheless remain distinct. This is important to recognize in Foucault's thought—that in different works he accounts for different modes of modern power, and he is not offering a totalizing critique of modernity as a result. A single subject is the site of multiple workings of power.

⁵² Michel Foucault, "The Will to Knowledge," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, Paul Rabinow, ed. (New York: The New Press, 1997), 12. Emphasis mine.

⁵³ The presence of "social forms" that condition knowledge belies a structuralist leaning present in Foucault's earlier work, most notably *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), in which he writes on page 168 that "In any given culture and at any given moment, there is always only one episteme that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in a practice." Foucault distanced himself from this stance in later works, theorizing a more fluid concept of power, allowing for the existence of a multiplicity of social forms working within one culture, moment, and subject.

More clearly than Nietzsche, Foucault shows modalities of freedom to be practices in modern subject formation. The mobilization of liberty, for example, can be the mode through which modern states govern their subjects in what Foucault investigates through the lens of governmentality. The liberal subject, which imagines a state of liberty prior to power, is used as a fiction on which to ruminate on the nature of government today.⁵⁴ The question becomes how best to govern, based on the social contract model. As an effect of a modern mode of power, then, the liberal subject, this embodiment of liberty, is used to justify political action and social inquiry. Foucault critiques this unreflexive work, stressing that "[g]enealogical analysis shows that the concept of liberty is 'an invention of the ruling class' and not fundamental to man's nature or at the root of his attachment to being and truth."⁵⁵ While conceptualizations of liberty take this understanding of freedom to be ahistorical, Foucault situates it within a particular discourse that produces "governable" subjects. The mobilization of liberty, read through Foucault's exegesis of power, is the condition for the legal-juridical framework for modern states.⁵⁶ In linking the new economy of punishment to its later justification within the rights-based subject, Foucault stresses that, historically speaking, "The 'Enlightenment', which discovered the liberties, also invented the disciplines."⁵⁷

Emancipation, which Foucault situates within "evolutive historicity" is, according to him, similarly "bound up with a mode of functioning of power."⁵⁸ When we historicize

⁵⁴ This is a point explored at length by Rose, in *Powers of Freedom*.

⁵⁵ Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 223.

⁵⁶ This does not imply a direct causal relationship between liberty as a concept and the emergence of a legal-juridical apparatus. Rather, it is to say that the *discourse* of liberty and the discursive practices embedded in the legal-juridical framework are co-constituting, part of the same nexus of knowledge-production.

⁵⁷ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House, 1995), 222.

⁵⁸ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 160-161.

its claims, we see that it has a particular linear understanding of time which allows theory to be mobilized in a certain way—towards emancipation itself.

For Foucault, emancipation "runs the risk of falling back on the idea that there exists a human nature or base that...has been concealed, alienated or imprisoned in and by mechanisms of repression."⁵⁹ These mechanisms of repression position freedom in opposition to power. Foucault is most adamant when discussing the extent to which the supposed "repression" of sexuality in the Victorian era was in actuality a *proliferation* of the discourse of sexuality. This proliferation depended on the positivity of power, while masking this very fact through the mobilization of repressive-liberatory antinomies of sexuality.⁶⁰

Emancipation thus masks the emergence of biopolitics in modern society, in its productive capacities. In situating human nature in biology, not history, the mobilization of emancipation results in a concern with delving deep into the body, yet generalizing any particular body, extrapolating to the level of "the population." The social-scientific drive to understand social processes and their relation to essential selves is a drive to produce subjects in a particular way. The life processes of the human are understood to be both malleable to an extent and generalizable. Thus, Foucault discusses the increasing concern in the 19th century to regulate, understand, and systematize the body, while this effort was concealed within the ostensive uncovering of the truth of the human. Foucault

⁵⁹ Foucault, "The Ethic of Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," 282. The term Foucault specifically refers to is "liberation" in this interview. Conceptually, however, liberation is synonymous with the concept I employ: emancipation.

⁶⁰ This is most extensively explored in Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. I—An Introduction* (New York: Random House, 1990).

notes that "[t]he irony of this deployment is in having us believe that our 'liberation' is in the balance."⁶¹

If we begin with the social ontology of the subject, as Foucault, following Nietzsche, does, we recognize that the drive to understand the processes of death is a drive to regulate life. Note, as Foucault does, that suicide became one of the first conducts investigated by sociology.⁶² The act wherein one takes his/her own life is the subject of scrutiny precisely because death needs to be understood and regulated by “a society in which political power has assigned itself the task of administering life.”⁶³ While “life” is spoken of as if it exists outside of power, the modern subject is increasingly opened to deeper and deeper levels of scrutiny, which have not discovery but production of the human as their goal.

The mobilization of emancipation, understood as the drive to “free” the human from him/herself, relates in Foucault’s work to the individuated effort to “know thyself,” and this is a mode through which agency works on the subject. Agency, as I have framed it, involves the preoccupation with the individual actor in descriptive analysis, as one who is able to step outside power, using one’s capacities of reason. Linked to this is Foucault’s examination of the hermeneutics of the self, a mode of self-preoccupation that has its roots in antiquity, yet permeates modernity. Foucault historicizes concern with the human subject, and the understanding of the human him/herself as a reflexive actor. The agency of the human, as an element of his/her rational capacities, has not been discovered

⁶¹ Foucault, *History of Sexuality VI*, 159.

⁶² This is explored in Foucault, *The History of Sexuality VI*, 138-139.

⁶³ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality VI*, 139. The connections I draw here are indebted to Agamben, as he links the dual trajectories of governmentality and biopolitics, in an investigation in to the extent to which particular subjects are produced as “sacred,” killed but not mourned, in the modern state. This is explored in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

through more refined techniques of knowledge-generation and more rigorous scientific evaluations. Rather, it is the concomitant element that emerges simultaneously within the modern mode of being. The subject is produced through a particular mode of knowledge, simultaneously being the basis and apology for the mode of knowledge itself. It is this paradox that Foucault unveils through his genealogical analyses.

Foucault writes of the slow development of the modern mode of self-preoccupation, which involves "a type of work on oneself that implies a decipherment of the soul and a purificatory hermeneutics of the desires; and a mode of ethical fulfillment that tends towards self-renunciation."⁶⁴ The ironic formulation thus develops, wherein one must continually seek to know oneself in totality, in order to renounce what one is. Similarly, the agency of the subject, when affirmed in descriptive analysis, is simultaneously *negated*.

The drive within the hermeneutics of the self is to uncover the truth of oneself. That one could possibly know oneself through rigorous work upon oneself belies the reliance upon one's existence within a non-social, rational space, something on which the concern for agency relies as well. Similarly, that the human can somehow stand outside him/herself whilst working upon him/herself relies on the principle of objectivity necessary for descriptive analysis. The attempt to rationalize and therefore "manage" one's desires is reminiscent of Weber's attempt to ascribe emotionally motivated action to a non-social category, and to read social action through the lens of rational motivation.

The three trajectories of liberty, emancipation and agency, derided by Nietzsche, are systematically explored by Foucault to be elements within the modern episteme,

⁶⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality VIII—The Care of the Self* (New York: Random House, 1988), 239-240.

visible within discursive practices on bodies, techniques of government, and work within the social sciences themselves. What Foucault's analysis shows is the extent to which the mobilizations of liberty, emancipation and agency, though not identical, nevertheless contain common elements and can exist within one subject. This is important to note because, as the previous chapter discussed, these discourses emerged in social theory in tension with one another, to the extent that emancipation, for example, established itself as a refutation of liberty, not as an acknowledged continuity of thought. The modern subject lives on a conflicted, contestable terrain indeed.

Normativity

The category of "sex" is, from the start, normative; it is what Foucault has called a "regulatory ideal."

Butler⁶⁵

Dispersed as it is into daily practices on and within the body, power is difficult to characterize in a particular way, yet may be understood conceptually as productive of a normative frame of intelligibility. Foucault writes that "[a] normalizing society is the historical outcome of a technology of power centered on life."⁶⁶ The norm is thus masked in a drive to understand life, to understand the human, as an ahistorical phenomenon. Modern society operates in a normative way; though the norm may change in its particular mode of power, the relation between the norm and its production of modern subjects can be investigated, and freedom found within the relation between the two.

Normativity, broadly understood as a constellation of discursive practices that condition the emergence (and visibility) of a particular subject in social relations, is the concept through within which Foucault and Butler coalesce. Echoing Foucault, Butler

⁶⁵ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 1.

⁶⁶ Foucault, *History of Sexuality VI*, 144.

writes that “[t]he power of discourse to materialize its effects is thus consonant with the power of discourse to circumscribe the domain of intelligibility.”⁶⁷ The “material” world, at times thought outside or prior to power, is in fact conditioned by power, operating in reference to normativity. Thus, the normative frame, as it appears in a particular place and time in society, conditions in what mode the human being appears, or whether or not some humans appear at all.

Butler takes from Foucault’s exploration of modern power and pushes it into different vectors of inquiry, two of which I highlight here: the realm of gendered identity, and the theorization of the presence of the *social* in the *psyche*. Her own critique of what I have called pre-Nietzschean freedoms is staged within contemporary political debates, in which the liberal subject is used as a fiction in order to promulgate liberal discourse, and Western violence. In contemporary society, Butler stresses, ruminations on ethics and political imperatives must go beyond the fiction of the knowable subject because “liberal norms presupposing an ontology of discrete identity cannot yield the kinds of analytic vocabularies we need for thinking about global interdependency and the interlocking networks of power and position in contemporary life.”⁶⁸ Thus the task, in asking the question of freedom, becomes one of capturing “political agency in post-liberatory times.”⁶⁹

Butler uses the concept of performativity to underscore her theory of the subject’s relation to the norm. She invites us to “[c]onsider gender, for instance, as a *corporeal style*, an ‘act,’ as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where ‘*performative*’

⁶⁷ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 187

⁶⁸ Butler, *Frames of War*, 31.

⁶⁹ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 18.

suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning.”⁷⁰ Gender, as a signifier "enacted" in the social world, is particularly interesting because of its relation to so-called materiality, which is investigated in the sex/gender distinction. Butler, following Foucault, asserts the problem with marking gender as social, as opposed to sex as pre-social, a move that elides the problem of sex as being the linguistic condition of expression of particular genders. Sex is not prior to one's social situatedness; rather, the operation of "sex" as a term has social consequences for the operation and performance of gender. Asserting the ontology of sex or gender is thus problematic, as "ontology is...not a foundation, but a normative injunction that operates insidiously by installing itself into political discourse as its necessary ground."⁷¹

Butler belies her Nietzschean lineage when, drawing from the latter's critique of the "doer behind the deed" (as assumed within the concept of agency), she writes that "[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results."

Further,

[t]he question of locating “agency” is usually associated with the viability of the “subject,” where the “subject” is understood to have some stable existence prior to the cultural field that it negotiates. Or if the subject is culturally constructed, it is nevertheless vested with an agency, usually figured as the capacity for reflexive mediation, that remains intact regardless of its cultural embeddedness.⁷²

Social theory, Butler stresses, must move beyond this orientation, conducting its inquiries within the acknowledgement of the performativity of theory itself. Agency assumes a prediscursive “I,” not an “I” that is actively being constructed and disassembled within

⁷⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 190.

⁷¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 203.

⁷² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 195.

social relations and holds the ability to act as a function of power, not an innate capacity to “step outside” one’s conditioning. In asserting the performative nature of gender, Butler stresses that the gendered subject simultaneously reflects and enacts the normative construction of gender and sex, making normativity an iterative process.

Beyond extending the concept of the norm into social iterability, highlighting its performative dimension, Butler critiques Foucault for not pushing his inquiry into the process of subject–formation further, into the psychic realm. In addressing this deficiency, Butler asks: "What is the psychic form that power takes?"⁷³ If indeed the subject is formed through vectors of power, circumscribed by normativity, then a preoccupation with the interior workings of the psyche is grounds for reflection into the modern subject. In providing this, Butler seeks to delve into the subject's place in the citational chain of intelligibility, through which power manifests itself.

Butler cites Nietzsche's account of conscience in considering the presence of the social in the psyche. She begins by noting that the condition of the subject's emergence in socially intelligible terms is its "turning" on itself, whereby the subject is inaugurated in "a founding moment whose ontological status remains permanently uncertain."⁷⁴ The task becomes one of thinking through the subject's subordination to power in its inception (as the psyche forms), yet its continual instability, as a condition for new subject-positions and psychic topologies.

The concept of the turn is indebted to Nietzsche’s positing of the formation of bad conscience, which occurs when the will turns on itself, frustrates itself, and emerges psychically as a modern subject, full of guilt and *ressentiment* (though also inaugurated

⁷³ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 2.

⁷⁴ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 3-4.

by *ressentiment*, a paradox Butler navigates). Butler explores the temporality of such an understanding of psychic formation, noting the difficulty in speaking about a subject that did not exist before its turning, yet existed to the degree that it could be said to turn, in an inaugurative move. Butler goes beyond the Nietzschean formulation of conscience, critiquing Nietzsche's account in the process, a point that I will return to later. She nevertheless asserts her dependence on his thought, noting that "Nietzsche offers us a political insight into the formation of the psyche and the problem of subjection, understood paradoxically not merely as the subordination of a subject to a norm, but as the constitution of a subject precisely through that subordination."⁷⁵ The distinction is essential to make, and has many implications for precisely how one can understand human actions in the world, and the relation between social forces on the psyche and the potential to affect these social forces, in what may be called freedom.

Modes of Relation

Every anthropology of the subject touches on its ontology, hence...every investigation of a subject in its conditioning by the manner, the nature, the attitude of man leads us towards the subject's place in being and its function in meaning.

Buber⁷⁶

Buber reckons with the problem of normativity when understanding modernity as engendering a particular mode of relation between subjects. In *I and Thou*, he posits two essential modes of existence that the human can establish in relation to the world, the I-Thou and the I-It. Both relations begin with the "word," spoken by the human subject. The human is capable of saying the word of I-Thou or I-It, which enables either relation. The word that is spoken is not meant in an entirely literal sense, though it can mean

⁷⁵ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 66.

⁷⁶ Buber, *The Knowledge of Man*, 139-140.

actual speech; rather, it indicates a way of addressing the other. When one says the word of I-It, he/she is addressing the other as a thing, or in a particular way. Conversely, the word of I-Thou involves no particularity, but the totality of the other. Either word opens up a certain "mode of existence."⁷⁷

Buber emphasizes "the word" in his philosophy for several reasons. Words are particular to human beings, which means that the utterance of the I-Thou or I-It is an essentially human quality. Also, the word as spoken is a social occurrence: "The importance of the spoken word...is grounded in the fact that it does not want to remain with the speaker."⁷⁸ Thus, Buber relates the nature of the two possible relations to be situated in a particular time and place. The human is faced with an other—not an abstract principle, nor a sense of otherness, but a real, particular other, exterior to him/herself—and is able to respond in one of two ways. If he/she speaks the word of I-It, the relation is necessarily limited; however, if he/she speaks the word I-Thou, then he/she is open to a relation of "whole to whole," which for Buber is a true relation. Importantly, the I-Thou relation does not involve the I and the other becoming one, in the sense of a total, undifferentiated reality being achieved. Buber is insistent that this is not the case. Rather, a certain relation is reached, where absolute recognition of the other opens a space for the reality of "the between." Whereas the I-It relation is mediated through various sense-perceptions or particular thoughts, "[t]he relation to the You is unmediated."⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 53. I use the translation by Walter Kaufmann for this thesis. In it, Kaufmann translates "I and Thou" as "I and You," in an effort to avoid archaic language typically associated with biblical passages, which may mislead the reader. As such, in this paper, I alternate between "Thou" and "You" for the same term, depending on who is being quoted. Typically, I will employ the word "Thou," as I do not share Kaufmann's concern.

⁷⁸ Buber, *The Knowledge of Man*, 112.

⁷⁹ Buber, *I and Thou*, 62.

However, "[t]he individual You *must* become an It when the event of relation has run its course."⁸⁰ Thus, Buber does not hold out hope for a utopian project in which society is comprised of purely I-Thou relations. While he is critical of the society he sees rising in modernity, and envisions other forms of possible communities, he does not feel that the limited I-it relations within the world can be fully overcome, as an 'end of history' theorist may espouse. Echoing Nietzsche, he writes that "[t]o be sure, some men who in the world of things make do with experiencing and using have constructed for themselves an idea annex or superstructure in which they find refuge and reassurance in the face of intimations of nothingness."⁸¹ The idea that freedom can be structurally present or ideally realized as a state in which we live is seen as a reaction to the nihilism permeating modernity.

When the subject says It, he/she opens a relation that is conditioned in a particular way. As with Butler, the "I" that speaks It simultaneously forms him/herself in a particular way. This is the problem of normativity, where the particularities of discursive operations act on the individual as he/she simultaneously reproduces these operations. Whereas Butler reflects on the psychic operation in this inaugerative move, Buber refuses to divorce the "I" from the word pair "I-It," meaning that the I exists outside itself. Thus, the modern subject is an embodiment of a particular relation. Buber writes, for example, of the mode of dialogue typical of modern existence, which "is technical dialogue, which is prompted solely by the need of objective understanding."⁸²

⁸⁰ Buber, *I and Thou*, 84.

⁸¹ Buber, *I and Thou*, 65.

⁸² Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 22.

This reveals a common concern with Foucault's hermeneutics of the subject, wherein one is taken as an object of knowledge to be uncovered. To treat one's self and others as bastions of truth that need to be accessed in particular details is to establish a certain mode of existence between humans and objects, humans and other humans, and humans and their own selves. For Buber, this is a necessarily limited relation, one that does not grasp the totality of human potential.

Friedman highlights Buber's congruence with Nietzsche, noting that, for Buber, "one's urges, far from being evil, are the very things which make greatness possible."⁸³ The rejection of the body, derided by Nietzsche as an ascetic ideal, manifest in modern subjectivity, is similarly rejected by Buber, who has little time for other-worldly considerations; rather, Buber's work is grounded in the here and now, within and between physical bodies.⁸⁴ This is derived from Nietzsche, for whom Buber sees a "thawing moment" in history.⁸⁵ His injunction serves to show the object-relations we have built in modernity for what they are: mere constructs, contingently realized, and open to disassembly.⁸⁶

Buber has a keen interest in interrogating modes of existence, which flow through and between subjects, something that comes to echo Foucault's notion of power. Buber critiques modernity for producing effects that continually outpace the human's ability to

⁸³ Maurice Friedman, *Encounter on the Narrow Ridge: A Life of Martin Buber* (New York: Paragon House, 1991), 42.

⁸⁴ In his works which antedate *I and Thou*, Buber conveys a greater sympathy for mysticism, which would concern itself with a renunciation of the world, and a retreat into transcendent truth beyond the physical body. However, *I and Thou* signifies an important reconfiguration of Buber's thought, and all subsequent work reflects the seminal thought of this text, in which mysticism is firmly rejected. Therefore, I examine Buber post *I and Thou*, considering this the time of his mature thought, and the works pertinent to this paper.

⁸⁵ Buber writes of the possibility of moments to "thaw" history, on 82 of *I and Thou*.

⁸⁶ See, for example, *I and Thou*, 100-106, for a critique of historical causal analysis.

relate to them. The rise of “objective relations,” in which the human relates to things and other humans as objects, is something attributable to modern society. For Buber, it is inevitable that man/woman makes objects of those to whom he/she relates. This is a quality of the I-it relation, which is visible in society in particularities. The problem arises when the relation understood as objective comes to colonize all others, becoming the primary mode of relation between humans and humans, and humans and things. Buber is equally critical of the absolute presence of subjective relations, which seek to reduce all aspects of feeling to that of the singular individual (as a concept of agency would have us do). There is another relation, that of whole to whole, totality to totality, that exists between the poles of subjectivity and objectivity.

Freedom as a Condition of Power

[I]f there are relations of power in every social field, this is because there is freedom everywhere.

Foucault⁸⁷

The essential point pertinent to this discussion on which Foucault, Butler and Buber converge with regard to Nietzsche’s thought is within a consideration of freedom as a condition, rather than antinomy, of power. Indeed, if power is seen to be diffused into all areas of life, from familial associations to sexual relations, this suggests that normativity can be contested on all these levels as well. Thus, political contestation can be staged within the micro-physics of power, which subtly change normative constructions of the subject; it can occur on the level of the subject, in daily practices and material relations.

Butler writes within these implications when ruminating on the presence of social conditioning within the psyche, establishing the inner realm of the modern subject as one

⁸⁷ Foucault, "The Ethics of Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," 28.

place for practices of freedom. For Butler, it is a function of the temporality of identity construction that allows for potential disruption. Though power *forms* the subject, power *needs* the subject to continually reproduce its effects. Thus, the possibility of contestation is continually and structurally present. It is also structurally necessary, however, that contestation must be limited by the normativity that circumscribes action in a particular time and place. Change is invariably *limited*, yet invariably *possible*.

Buber writes of the potential for relations between humans as everyday realities through which freedom may be realized, making his stand “in the here and now.”⁸⁸ The I-Thou relation is an emergent possibility within the world of It, to which it must invariably return. Thus, the freedom that is possible is only present as a result of the social world, and the I-Thou relation will take certain particular forms dependant upon one's social-cultural milieu. One cannot answer the call of the other in the same way, but must be open to the changing conditions from which the I-Thou relation will emerge.

In different ways that overlap significantly yet not completely, Foucault, Butler and Buber converge with Nietzsche in that they ruminate on the social ontology of the subject, they take the modern subject as the ground of their analysis, and they reject transcendent notions of freedom as a result, which would locate an essential freedom beyond the social relations in which we are embedded. In asserting the social ontology of the modern subject, as the bad conscience of the modern subject is formed through the subject turning on itself, Nietzsche, with Foucault, Butler and Buber following him, asserts that freedom cannot be understood as something transcendent, to be uncovered in the world. Rather, freedom must be made real through social practice, action that

⁸⁸ Kaufmann notes this in the introduction to *I and Thou*, 48.

produces effects in the world and that, in time, may lead us beyond modern man himself. In modernity, the human is not an end state but a bridge to something beyond: the Overman.

Limit Experience

The most concerned minds today ask: 'How is the human to be preserved?' But Zarathustra is the first and only one to ask: 'How is the human to be overcome?'

Nietzsche⁸⁹

The subject, existing within social relations (not prior or transcendent from them), is where Nietzsche begins his discussion of freedom. Importantly, however, Nietzsche believes that the time will come when modern man is *overcome*, his subjectivity yielding to something beyond, on the horizon of the knowable. This becomes the teleology informing his work, as a kind of anti-teleology, wherein the purpose of freedom is destruction of the subject, not its consummation—or, rather, the modern subject's consummation in its destruction.

This destruction, which occurs on the limits of social possibility and signifies the arrival of the overman, is realized within the pursuit of limit-experience, through the assertion of the will. Experience that occurs on the limit, that is willfully realized, pushes the realm of the knowable; what is “true” about the subject yields to what can be made true. Limit-experience thus denotes the willful pursuit of new truths about oneself and the social world, what Nietzsche dubs the “will to truth,” always occurring on the horizon of normativity. Foucault, Butler, and Buber overlap significantly within this imperative, understood as a practice of freedom, before significantly diverging from—or exceeding—Nietzsche's thought in various ways.

⁸⁹ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 250.

Nietzsche begins *The Twilight of the Idols* with instructions on how to philosophize “with a hammer.”⁹⁰ He writes that to smash the idols of modernity is to prepare the ground for a going-beyond. He thus sees critique as one mode of limit-experience, breaking us from our taken-for-granted assumptions. Foucault sees critique as asking the following question: “In what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints?”⁹¹ Critique thus attempts to turn one’s gaze away from one’s own ontological and epistemological grounding. As a mode of social practice, it relies on the assumption that nothing is immutable, that everything is contingent, and that revealing this contingency can produce effects in the material world. Butler in particular stresses the potential for spoken and written acts to change the vectors of power, a point to which I will return. Though it invariably has a destructive valence, critique rests on the assumption that destruction itself is productive. Thus, the critique Nietzsche envisions establishes a different relation to oneself and one’s reality. The impetus is not to replace one truth with another, but rather to assume a general orientation of undermining truth, as an open-ended practice. This opening is sympathetic to Buber’s theorization of the subject-position of the I-Thou, wherein the I of the I-Thou practices a will-ingness (a directing of the will) to relate, thereby opening itself to its own destruction.

As a general orientation, the pursuit of limit-experience in the world seeks to throw the subject into disarray, to seek its own annihilation. This self-destruction can take many forms, within discursive but also corporeal forms (though, of course, the two are

⁹⁰ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 31-32.

⁹¹ Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”, in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, Paul Rabinow ed. (New York: The New Press, 1997), 315.

not so different). The use of drugs, in which one's subjectivity is fundamentally altered temporarily through chemical means, would be one avenue through which to pursue limit experience. Philosophy itself would be another, as Foucault stresses that proper philosophy always seeks to unground itself. Beyond specific examples, however, the pursuit of limit-experience involves the recognition that one is normalized in a certain way, and that a practice of freedom involves continually seeking to push the bounds of normativity. As we are formed through these normative practices, however, pushing the realms of the normal means pushing the realms of our own selves.

James Miller reads Foucault's life and work in tandem, stressing that much of Foucault's writing is informed by the Nietzschean injunction to "become what one is."⁹² Miller's biographic lens renders Foucault work as indicative of the pursuit of limit experience. I highlight here where this appears to be true, though this is ultimately a problematic rendering of Foucault's understanding of freedom in particular, which will be discussed later. For Foucault, the pursuit of limit-experience involves embracing spontaneous action, in the politics of revolt. He stresses that "the age of revolution has arrived."⁹³ To revolt, in this sense, is to begin again, to return to the subject and self, to revisit the question of freedom in a new way, in opposition to the contemporary mode of being. Within the vicissitudes of revolt are the potential for freedom. We cannot predict nor dictate the spontaneous reaction in which freedom appears as self-work. It is in the unpredictability of revolt itself, in which the subject reacts viscerally, saying "No!" either alone or as part of a collective, and seeks the annihilation of itself, in which Foucault

⁹² James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (Toronto: Simon and Shuster, 1993), 164. Miller draws from Nietzsche, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 208, while Nietzsche himself draws from Pindar in uttering this phrase, as Graham Parkes notes (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, explanatory notes, 315).

⁹³ Michel Foucault, "Is it useless to Revolt?", 6.

imagines freedom. Revolt, as limit-experience, is dangerous, and therein lies its potential. The danger one faces can be physical or social death. In the former, one risks one's corporeal existence; in the latter, one risks one's intelligibility in the world. In freedom lurks the specter of madness, understood as being outside of normativity and therefore socially elided. Nevertheless, the potential for the realization of freedom, however temporary, is present in the structure of revolt. This is why Foucault stresses that despite what lasting effects are produced, which are inevitably normative in nature, it is not useless to revolt because the revolt itself, as spontaneous conflict with one's social and political world, is a practice of freedom.⁹⁴

Butler pursues limit-experience through the lens of gender, pushing the limits of normative constructions, not to seek “inclusion” of all genders in to the pre-existing normative frame, but to expose the violent foreclosures inherent in the very efficacy of these frames. In performatively seeking and exposing the “outside” to discourse, Butler stresses that the task is not to find other categories on which to stand, but to seek the fissures within pre-existing hetero-normative discourses—to trouble the ground on which we stand ourselves:

The task is to refigure this necessary 'outside' as a future horizon, one in which the violence of exclusion is perpetually in the process of being overcome. But of equal importance is the preservation of the outside, the site where discourse meets its limits, where the opacity of what is not included in a given regime of truth acts as a disruptive site of linguistic impropriety and unrepresentability, illuminating the violent and contingent boundaries of that normative regime precisely through the inability of that regime to represent that which might pose a fundamental threat to its continuity.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Foucault is adamant on this point when discussing the Iranian revolution, in which the overthrow of the Shah led to numerous atrocities committed by the revolutionaries themselves (see Foucault, "Is it Useless to Revolt?").

⁹⁵ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 53.

Butler's analysis of drag relies on an understanding of social relations as not only performative but as *performance*. The reflexive "presentation of the self" (to borrow from Goffman) is the mode through which an agent comes to practice freedom, through the self-conscious disruption of normative frames of understanding, which Nietzsche would see as constraining the superior mind. Freedom is a political practice of resignification, through which the normative signifiers that have been used to exclude particular subjects can be reappropriated, signifying a positivity of identity, circumventing the exclusionary practice engendered by the term. The resignification of the word "queer" is a good example of this practice. Whereas in the past "queer" was a label used to denigrate some subjects, marking the point at which the operation of the heterosexual norm was made visible, the term has, to a point, been used by these very subjects it had sought to elide, reappropriated in ways that trouble the heteronormative ideal itself. The negative operation of "queer" has gained positive energy, resignified as a political identity by those who have been previously negated by the same term.

Drag similarly represents the discursive possibilities of challenging normative representations of gender. Butler writes: "I would suggest as well that drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity."⁹⁶ She continues to theorize what can disrupt, destabilize, and parody normative identity formation, particularly as it relates to gender. Drag is one mode through which a social act can live and perform on the limits of the knowable.

⁹⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 186.

The pursuit of limit-experience for Butler means working within ambivalent psychic and discursive spaces, because “[i]t is the space of this ambivalence which opens up the possibility of a reworking of the very terms by which subjectivation proceeds—and fails to proceed.”⁹⁷ Similarly, Buber writes that “it is not the unambiguity of a word but its ambiguity that constitutes living language.”⁹⁸ Words are never cemented in their usage, but open to appropriation, dependent on their relational emergence in language. In traversing the limits of words, finding new modes of expression of older forms of language, we seek the limits of our own subjectivity.

Critique and the pursuit of limit-experience reveal to the subject that change is possible, while simultaneously effecting that change performatively. It must be stressed, however, that Nietzsche has no utopian project in mind for the subject; though he is hopeful of the coming of the overman, there remains so much ambivalence in this term that it serves as a discursive category for the non-teleological practice of freedom, to which one must return again and again, as an open-ended practice. Freedom is the assertion of will, tied to the concept of eternal recurrence, of which Nietzsche sees himself as the teacher.⁹⁹ Thus, Nietzsche asserts that the task is “to gain freedom from the belief in unfreedom.”¹⁰⁰

The concept of eternal recurrence posits that we should experience again and again the same, that we cannot step outside history, only live within it, and that there is nothing essential to life but *life itself*, which is “*essentially* appropriation, injury,

⁹⁷ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 124.

⁹⁸ Martin Buber, “The Word that is Spoken,” in *Knowledge of Man* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 104.

⁹⁹ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 121.

¹⁰⁰ Buber, *I and Thou*, 107.

overpowering of what is alien and weaker; suppression, hardness, imposition of one's own forms, incorporation and at least, at its mildest, exploitation..."¹⁰¹

To be acting in the world, to assert one's will, producing effects, is to abandon utopian ideals that enslave the modern human, and revel in the here and now. Eternal recurrence teaches that history is not something that can be escaped, and that the admission of this fact leads to an appreciation of the potential joy that the fleeting moment provides: "joy wants itself, wants eternity, wants recurrence, wants all-eternally-self-same."¹⁰² Buber is clearly influenced by Nietzsche when he situates freedom in the space of eternal recurrence as well. The willingness to return at all times back to the moment, wherein true relations may be realized, suggests a commitment to practices that are at all times attentive to the socio-historical time in which one finds oneself. The one who dances with fate—wherein one finds the situatedness of life—knows freedom; the one who continually returns to the relation, who knows how to return, knows freedom.

This appraisal of freedom is important to social inquiry for several reasons, some that can produce new vectors of inquiry, and some that problematize much of that on which social thought relies. What is crucial to recognize is how Nietzsche makes freedom something that only appears in the world. It is not a transcendent ideal, but only *real* when it is *visible*—that is, to the extent that it produces effects in society. The formation of bad conscience occurs when the subject turns on itself, frustrates its own will to dominate, and considers freedom, paradoxically, as the extent to which one subordinates oneself to others, and social mechanisms. Nietzsche makes no attempt to hide his derision of such an understanding, attributing it to the morality of the slaves. A noble spirit,

¹⁰¹ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 393.

¹⁰² Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 282.

conversely, would actualize freedom precisely through asserting his will over others. Indeed, as Nietzsche muses, “what would there be to create if Gods—existed!”¹⁰³

Freedom for Nietzsche is a positivity that spurns responsibility to anything but itself. It is the insatiability of will, and the realization of dominance. One is free to the extent that others are dominated, as “life simply *is* will to power.”¹⁰⁴ Buber echoes this emphasis on the positivity of the will when, in an interview, he notes that “[t]here is again and again in different manners a polarity, and the poles are not good and evil, but rather yes and no, rather acceptance and refusal.”¹⁰⁵ Freedom is to be sought in embracing the will that causes effects, saying “Yes!” to the challenges one faces in life, and to relive this circumstance, again and again.

Nietzsche shatters the social theorist’s relationship to what can be understood as the “really real.” Following him, Foucault, and Butler assert that ontology is the *effect* of freedom in significant ways. Rather than locating freedom in an ontological realm, to find or assert its essence, the task is to investigate the extent to which freedom troubles that which is immutable. The potential pitfalls within the pursuit of limit-experience must be faced, and the narrow ridge of freedom, between which the possibilities of death (both social and corporeal) and nihilism lie, must be traversed. As Nietzsche writes, “Whoever sees the abyss, but with an eagle’s eyes, whoever with an eagle’s talons *grasps* the abyss: he has courage.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 75.

¹⁰⁴ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 393.

¹⁰⁵ Martin Buber, “Dialogue Between Martin Buber and Carl R. Rogers,” in *The Knowledge of Man* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 170.

¹⁰⁶ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 251.

Divergence

We no more create from nothing the political terms that come to represent our “freedom” than we are responsible for the terms that carry the pain of social injury. And yet, neither of those terms are as a result any less necessary to work and rework within political discourse.

Butler¹⁰⁷

In writing the postscript to the knowable, pristine, and prior subject, Nietzsche points toward a subject which has not yet come, yet will embrace a different sort of freedom. This freedom he imagines is problematic, however, both in its logic and for social inquiry, and this is why we must move beyond Nietzsche himself, to those whose theorizations of freedom exceed Nietzsche’s important yet ultimately unsatisfactory contribution to the question of freedom.

Beyond positing the injurability of the subject, as a quality of its emergence itself, Butler stresses that *some subjects are more injurable than others*. While some of us seek self annihilation, in what can be considered the pursuit of limit-experience, others have annihilation thrust upon them. What of these subjects? Is our relation to them purely of derision, as Nietzsche would have it? Or does the unequal distribution of injury imply a certain ethic of care, as a practice of freedom?

In offering these questions, we begin to see how Foucault, Butler and Buber diverge from Nietzsche’s thought, in attempting to rethink freedom for the modern subject. The pursuit of limit-experience and critique rely upon a superior self—a self as exceptional, prior to and beyond social inclusion—one who is able to stamp his/her will upon an inferior world. This is a privileging of the self and a call towards the overman, who has not yet come. However, one must question to what extent freedom is realized socially when Zarathustra implores us to ascend above the common human: “One should

¹⁰⁷ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 229.

live upon mountains: With blissful nostrils I again breathe mountain-freedom! Redeemed is my nose at last from the smell of all humankind!”¹⁰⁸ To become free, it seems as if we must become Zarathustra himself, who is beyond society, not within it.

Foucault’s theorization of power appreciates social relations as productive at all times, which allows him to go beyond Nietzsche’s assertion of freedom as domination. In fact, this lens of domination is something social theory must push beyond. For Foucault, power is dispersed into infinitesimal techniques of subjection, and the subject requires the productivity of power to exist socially at all. Thus, though processes of power can be contested, establishing an antinomy of freedom and domination (recognizing freedom as being opposed to domination), contestation can only occur through other avenues of power itself. Nietzsche, at times, considers freedom and power interchangeably, as will-to-power. Foucault’s analysis is more nuanced, refusing to conflate these terms, though recognizing their essential link. For all his theorizing of the socially imprinted body, Nietzsche maintains that freedom is a privilege of noble souls, who are solitary wanderers embracing the vicissitudes of life uncompromisingly, and stamping on the world their will. Foucault, though sympathetic to this orientation in certain trajectories of thought, moves beyond this in considering an ethic of self-care as a practice of freedom, which will be discussed later.

Butler critiques Nietzsche for slipping between considerations of conscience and bad conscience, noting that though he is clearly contemptuous of the latter, Nietzsche requires the former, asserting that the human capacity to make and keep promises is essential to its overcoming itself. The modern subject, this embodiment of bad

¹⁰⁸ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 161.

conscience, is more clever than any of its predecessors, which means that it provides the grounds on which the human can become something more. In collapsing the difference between bad conscience and conscience, Butler theorizes a generalizable psychic form, requiring the injurability of the subject, which is the condition of social emergence, yet, as Butler continually stresses, differentially distributed.

These power differentials in society make some subjects more representable—more visible, socially—than others.¹⁰⁹ Are we to suggest that these subjects should simply make themselves more visible, risking death? Are there ways that recast social relations that would seek to redress the elision of some subjects, particularly when the efficacy of some vectors of power are retained *precisely through the domination of others*? To begin and end with the will to power, ignoring what place ethics has within considerations of freedom, is not satisfactory. The ultimately narcissistic orientation Nietzsche holds with respect to freedom is undone in the face of the Other, which is the injunction to not do harm, though one has the capability—indeed, even the desire—to do so.¹¹⁰

Buber's struggle with Nietzsche in his own life is interesting to relate. Here is a thinker who so seriously contended with Nietzsche's thought that it nearly drove him to suicide, thinking that if life were reduced to the contestation of wills, this was not a world in which one should live. That Buber was able to overcome Nietzsche is attributable to his reliance on the Thou, which emerges as something excessive to Nietzsche's limit-experience.

¹⁰⁹ Butler, *Frames of War*, 138.

¹¹⁰ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2006), 138. Butler is drawing from the work of Levinas in this theorization, on which I will expand later.

In critiquing Nietzsche, Buber writes: “The world as *experience* belongs to the basic word I-It.”¹¹¹ To push beyond experience reveals another possibility of relation: that between I and Thou. Those who do not strive to relate to the world with their whole being say You, but mean “You, my ability to use!”¹¹² To understand the other as something to be used, in order to assert one's own will, and not to acknowledge the extent to which one *wills* only when one *relates*—this is the point of contention in which Buber sets himself apart from Nietzsche.

Similarly, Buber is critical of the conflation of freedom with a sort of escape from the “I” which may temporarily suspend one’s subjectivity (as in the consumption of drugs), but is ultimately misguided, as “the fugitive flight out of the claim of the situation into situationlessness... is no legitimate affair of man.”¹¹³ The temporary suspension of subjectivity, as opposed to the mode through which one’s subjectivity is irreversibly changed, is the difference between escapism and the true realization of freedom. In not clearly delineating the difference between the two, Nietzsche lives the life of monologue, as opposed to dialogue. Buber insists that to escape, into mind-altering drugs or a ‘natural’ setting, forecloses a different kind of being in the world, that which comes between I and Thou.¹¹⁴

Buber specifically critiques the will to power when he writes: “When we see a great man desiring power instead of his real goal we soon realize that he is sick.”¹¹⁵ The pursuit of power for its own sake, rather than the exercise of power in the furtherance of

¹¹¹ Buber, *I and Thou*, 56. Emphasis mine.

¹¹² Buber, *I and Thou*, 109.

¹¹³ Buber, *The Knowledge of Man*, 90.

¹¹⁴ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 25.

¹¹⁵ Martin Buber, “What is Man?”, in *Between Man and Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 180.

an intended goal, is what Buber feels Nietzsche has not drawn a distinction between. Unlike Nietzsche, Buber believes in the self-evident character of greatness, apart from its manifestation within vectors of power. For Nietzsche, power and greatness are synonymous. For Buber, greatness is only realized when it goes beyond the individual will that generates action. It is only between wills that something more is created, not within them.

Buber further laments "Nietzsche's wrong answer to the anthropological question."¹¹⁶ Though he relies on some understanding of the intentionality of the Will in his theorization, Buber notes that humans require *confirmation* as well as Will in the realization of freedom. This relates to Butler's notion that freedom is all times conditioned by normative frames of intelligibility. Thus, it is not enough to assert one's will; one must be confirmed in this assertion, exterior to oneself, as well. Freedom, as a social practice, involves a negotiation with that which is outside oneself, something explored in the next chapter through the over-arching concept of care. The exterior world is not to be dominated in this formulation; rather, freedom arrives through the confirmation of an intentionality of will.

Ultimately, Nietzsche relies on *positivity qua positivity*, a self-referential freedom; he sees hate, destruction, beauty, care and creation as all possible vectors of freedom, exercised by the formidable will, which only looks within itself for justification. This positions freedom in opposition to society, particularly modern society, as a world colonized by the herd instinct. Freedom is only possible on the heights, in the mountains where Zarathustra dwells, and Nietzsche himself composed his works. As someone who

¹¹⁶ Buber, "What is Man?", 182.

is at pains to historicize the subject, as the grounds for his critique of modern inflections of freedom, Nietzsche is frustratingly reductionistic on his own passionate explication of freedom. If God is dead, why are we to put ourselves in his place? Are we not conditioned by our own sociality? Nietzsche stresses that "each one of us should devise *his own* virtue, *his own* categorical imperative."¹¹⁷ How this is possible, based on Nietzsche's own historical ontology of the subject, is a question that must be asked.

Freedom has no external qualifier for Nietzsche. It cannot be held up to any social criteria of judgment, and cannot be evaluated with reference to moral codes or absolute law. It is not conditioned by modes of social practice that are more ethical or true—it *creates* ethics; it *creates* truth. As a result, freedom can only be viewed in retrospect. In social theory, then, we must always be looking backward to freedom. When something new arrives in society, instigating social change, we attempt to look back to see its genesis. Thus, freedom becomes tautologically defined as the practice through which freedom itself appears.

How does Nietzsche himself appear to us in this way? Historically, his injunction into social thought can be understood as something new and unaccounted for in its entirety. At the very least, Nietzsche shows that, as theoreticians of the modern, to arrive at the question of freedom, we must wade through the mud, from which freedom itself emerges not as a pristine concept but as limited, contingent and fleeting. The horizon of modern man must be limited, to avoid transcendent notions and take a stand in the here and now. For Nietzsche, there are few who can actualize freedom and transcend their social conditions. This is where we leave him—in the realm of the privileged self, whose

¹¹⁷ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, 134.

will to dominate allows him to overcome modern subjectivity. I argue, however, that Foucault and Butler, though they convey sympathies with Nietzschean positions vis-à-vis freedom, go beyond limit-experience, into an understanding of self-care, beyond mere self-assertion.

And yet, as we go beyond Nietzsche, he must remain as a question in the back of our minds: What is the *value* of freedom?

Chapter Three—The Permutations of Self-Care

I would like [my thought] to be an elaboration of the self by the self, a studious transformation, a slow and arduous transformation through a constant care for the truth.

Foucault¹¹⁸

Though we move beyond Nietzsche in asking the question of freedom in social thought, we retain from his work two essential points: 1) that freedom must be understood as a mode of social practice, conducted by a subject whose ontology is thoroughly social, and 2) that freedom always occurs at the limits of the knowable, where the knowable is understood as a complex of power that conditions what is visible in the world, while necessarily sowing the seeds for its own overcoming, the eternal return of freedom itself. In this chapter, I more systematically explore the extent to which the pursuit of limit-experience, as a particular modality of freedom, is qualified within the works of Foucault, Butler, and Buber. I move from considering freedom as the arrival of that which changes vectors of power, to freedom as a *particular* way of changing normative power relations, including their formation of the modern subject. This is explored through the concepts of care and kinship, which become central to freedom precisely because of the injurability of the subject, as it appears in contemporary relations of power. We move, therefore, from the subject who *wills*, to the subject who *cares*.

Foucault, Butler, and Buber use the sound produced by Nietzsche, echoing it back, allowing it to reverberate, and, in this course, *changing* its tone. Thus, they exceed Nietzsche, particularly with regard to the concept of freedom. The solitary human, who mounts summits and revels in his/her freedom, is brought down to earth and makes

¹¹⁸ Michel Foucault, "The Concern for Truth," in *Foucault Live*, Sylvere Lotringer ed. (New York: Semiotext, 1989), 304.

his/her stand in the complexity of social relations. He/She must practice freedom in this world. He/She must adopt freedom as an ethic.

Foucault's novel and convincing mobilization of the concept of power occurs in what can be considered his 'genealogical' period of writing. His thought moves, however, toward a more systematic reckoning with the question of freedom itself, in his later work. This movement, I would argue, reflects, to a certain extent, Foucault's reckoning with the implications of his own theory, which can be cast as follows: if the process of modern subjection involves the ubiquitous circulation of power, which makes the subject intelligible by circumscribing particular domains of knowledge, what space is left for the subject to *change* the relations of power, to oppose normative discourse—to *be free*? Though the Nietzschean injunction to "become what one is" is a call to account for oneself through practices of freedom, Foucault, in his later work, begins to realize that this cannot be worked except through an ethic of self-care, with recourse to emerging social potentialities.

Beyond interrogating the modes through which modern subjects appear, we must ask again, and anew, the question of freedom, and the question of the human, not to answer these unequivocally (freedom is *thus*, the human is *thus*), and not to simply play with truth claims, but recognize that there is something materially at stake in these questions. Nietzsche falls short in not recognizing that if freedom must appear in the here and now, it must involve a negotiation with contemporary norms of subject-formation, norms which make some bodies more open to violence than others. Foucault notes,

[I]t is somewhat arbitrary to try to disassociate the effective practice of freedom by people, the practice of social relations, and the spatial distributions in which they find themselves. If they are separated, they become impossible to understand. Each can only be understood through the other.¹¹⁹

Thus, the critique Nietzsche levies against those inflections of freedom that fail to historicize their accounts can be turned onto Nietzsche himself. Though he writes of the possibility of the overman, as a potential emerging out of the modern subject, Nietzsche remains in the ahistorical realm when theorizing freedom.

Foucault brings Nietzsche to earth. As a public intellectual concerned with the issues particular to his social/political milieu, Foucault turned to the question of freedom as it was inflected by contemporary issues and possibilities. When asked what he has wanted to destroy, through his genealogical writings, Foucault exclaims: "I haven't wanted to destroy anything!"¹²⁰ It is easy to say that Foucault is not being entirely truthful in this statement, but this would neglect the extent to which he is subtly drawing a distinction between his and Nietzsche's practices of philosophy. Destruction itself is not the point for Foucault; rather, a "care-full" working through yields the potential for new social relations, new vectors of power, and an overcoming of modern subjectivity, limited though it may be.

For Foucault, Butler and Buber, freedom is not merely the privilege of noble souls; rather, it is a potential invested in every subject, and therefore the task becomes one of understanding what particular forms freedom make take within particular social fields. If indeed "there is no 'I' who stands *behind* discourse and executes its volition or

¹¹⁹Michel Foucault, "An Ethics of Pleasure," in *Foucault Live* (New York: Semiotext, 1989), 266.

¹²⁰Michel Foucault, "The Return of Morality," in *Foucault Live* (New York: Semiotext, 1989), 325.

will *through* discourse,”¹²¹ then practices of freedom, ethically conducted, take certain forms within pre-existing discourses.

I read this divergence from Nietzsche, which is in fact a logical progression from his own theory, with respect to the concept of self-care, a mode of relation to the self that is approached in diverse ways within the works of Foucault, Butler and Buber. The reason I centre on “care” as a term will hopefully become clear. I focus mainly on the works of Foucault and Butler in this discussion, due to the centrality of care in their thought and their contemporary social frame of reference, though Buber remains pertinent, and will be discussed as well.

What does "care" signify, beyond the destruction of the subject, in which one works upon oneself, in the pursuit of limit experience? Care is a particular way of relating to one's subject position, which has been opened through the operation of critique. It involves the limit-experience explored above, yet takes a certain form. To care for something is to treat it differently than to “study” it, or “consider” it. To care is to be concerned for one's wellbeing and future, and to approach one's object of interest with a deliberate and serious attitude, coupled with the aesthetics of existence, wherein one's self is treated technically, as an artist regards a sculpture. An ethic of care can thus be read as a constant and concerted practice of freedom conducted by modern subjects, on themselves as well as others.

Care requires social negotiation, and a particular relation to truth. It does not rely entirely on rationalist discourse in order to consider one's relation to oneself and others; rather, it is supra-rational, not lacking in rationality but *exceeding* it. Truth remains

¹²¹ Judith Butler, “Critically Queer,” in *Bodies that Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 225.

something to be created through social relations, yet it is significantly qualified by the conditions of one's emergence in the world. However, through concern for the self, truth moves from something to be uncovered, to something created through habitual practices and an intentionality of living. Care of the self thus asks the following question, which itself is a particular question of freedom: "Are there other ways of being addressed and constituted by the law, ways of being occupied and occupying the law, that disarticulate the power of punishment from the power of recognition?"¹²² In other words, are there novel ways of relating to the norms that govern our own intelligibility, beyond simple (and untenable) rejection of such norms? Can the twin processes of being subjugated yet visible, coerced yet agential, through power, be recast in their *relation* to each other?

From "Know Thyself" to "Take Care of Yourself"

This transformation of one's self by one's own knowledge is, I think, something rather close to the aesthetic experience. Why should a painter work if he is not transformed by his own painting?

Foucault¹²³

Foucault reads the dominant ethical prerogative in modernity to be "know thyself," the oft-quoted Socratic challenge. Foucault notes that this particular relation to the self takes a certain form within Christian pastoral practice, which resonates today as a will to renounce oneself:

The more we discover the truth about ourselves, the more we must renounce ourselves; and the more we want to renounce ourselves, the more we need to bring to light the reality of ourselves. That is what we would call the spiral of truth formulation and reality renouncement which is at the heart of Christian techniques of the self.¹²⁴

¹²² Judith Butler, "Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion," in *Bodies that Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 122.

¹²³ Michel Foucault, "An Interview With Stephen Riggins," in *Foucault Live* (New York: Semiotext, 1989), 131.

¹²⁴ Michel Foucault, "Sexuality and Solitude," in *Foucault Live* (New York: Semiotext, 1989), 178.

The Christian techniques of self-mastery seek to negate the self while uncovering it, through the practice of confessionality, through which the subject is called to tell the truth about itself. This enables the truth of the subject to be divorced from itself and circulated in discourse.

Butler relates the injunction to “know thyself” to her theorization of the call to “give an account of oneself” in moral philosophy. When the subject is called to account for itself, it is being formed as an “accountable subject” in discourse, one for whom conduct is judged in a contemporary moral sphere. Thus, the subject accounts for itself invariably with recourse to normative criteria for judgment, and normative criteria for what counts as a subject at all: “We start to give an account only because we are interpellated as beings who are rendered accountable by a system of justice and punishment.”¹²⁵ We respond to a query from an external authority, and are compelled to answer to the extent that our conduct fits within contemporary moral frames. This simultaneously produces the subject within these frames in a particular way: as an agent who is capable of saying “I.” Thus, in responding, the “I” is established as an agent who can know its motivations for action as well as be held accountable for the effects these actions have produced.

In the contemporary injunction to “know thyself,” the subject is called to account for itself in a specific way, opening itself to a specific mode of practice upon itself. The normative frame of morality requires a subject that can be known and know itself, being uncovered, recognized and articulated in speech. The problem in this formulation for Butler is the violence that can be perpetrated in the name of this “knowable” subject,

¹²⁵ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 10. Butler ultimately goes beyond this orientation as the only genesis of the accounts we give as subjects, noting that there is a primary desire to give an account and relate to others in this way. This is explored in chapter four.

which is understood to be an ahistorical, universal self. If the subject is presumed to be fully knowable, then the task becomes one of finding proper, invariant laws that govern one's moral conduct, and having these laws form the bedrock of the society in which humans live. The violence inherent in this formulation is seen when the moral law (which is presumed to be immutable) fails to account for unforeseen circumstances and comes into contradiction with other (presumably immutable) laws. Further, the presumption that morality is immutable and transhistorical can lead to violence perpetuated in the name of these laws, over those who are in need of 'liberation,' who do not know themselves, and are in need of education.¹²⁶

How, then, can we envision a different account of the subject? For this, Foucault reaches in to antiquity, and the different modes of relation to oneself that yield different potentials for practices and care for the self. With recourse to Roman and Greek approaches to pleasure, Foucault destabilizes the modern preoccupation with desire, suggesting that "the care of the self" and "the use of pleasure" are fundamentally different modes of relation to oneself and one's desires. There was more concern, in Greek thought, on the object of pleasure, rather than the subject of desire.¹²⁷ The ethical dilemma occurred when one desired an other. Rather than internalizing one's desire, turning it inward, desire remained something embodied in the other, an actively pursued rather than passively questioned entity. Ethics took the form not of uncovering one's frustrated desires, but as a style, externally realized and aesthetically performed. Rather

¹²⁶ Butler explores this potential at length in *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War*, two texts that interrogate American military deployment within its liberal frames of justification.

¹²⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality VII—The Use of Pleasure* (New York: Random House, 1990), 225.

than accounting for oneself through confessional practice, one's self is realized through social practices.

The stylistics of ethics Foucault sees as a possibility in which one can move from *uncovering* the truth of oneself to *practicing* truth upon oneself. An ethic of self-care would not reference a moral code that proscribes conduct, but rather conduct work upon the self as an open-ended and focused practice. To stylize ethics is to have self-expression take particular forms in social world, which belies an aesthetic concern for oneself. This goes beyond "the need to subject [sexual] activity to a universal form to which one is bound, a form grounded in both nature and reason, and valid for all human beings."¹²⁸ It provides a different account of the subject, not as a repository of desire, but as a medium through which desires and pleasures flow and intensify.

The difference between the concern for the subject of desire and the object of pleasure implies an aesthetic dimension to self work in the latter. The aesthetic regard for the self establishes oneself within a technical assemblage, yielding and morphing within practical activity. This mode of relation to the self, carefully and practically conducted, focuses on the practices of restraint, attention and care, rather than what these practices reveal about an essential self. Thus, the aesthetic sense focuses on the relation between the self and objects exterior to itself, mediated through purposeful technical activity.

The conceptual relation between care and art is explored by Buber, when he notes that art "makes the superfluous into the necessary."¹²⁹ A certain mode of relation can be opened by the self that we can call aesthetic, wherein truth (or necessity) is produced in a

¹²⁸ Foucault, *History of Sexuality VIII*, 238.

¹²⁹ Martin Buber, "Man and His Image-Work," in *Knowledge of Man* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 150.

relation with the objects of the world. For Buber, art, is the “image-work” of humans, which indicates that art appears as a product of the relation between the human and his/her exterior world. To regard oneself in this way, to make of oneself a work of art, is a mode of self-relation that uncovers potentialities of freedom.

The care of the self, through which aesthetics of the self are practiced, changes the “I” who stands in this relation of care. Buber writes of the potential for certain relations to engender the emergence of the “person” from the self. The nature of the “I” in the two relations I-Thou and I-It is fundamentally different:

The I of the basic word I-It appears as an ego and becomes conscious of itself of a subject (of experience and of use).

The I of the basic word I-You appears as a person and becomes conscious of itself as a subjectivity (without any dependent generative).¹³⁰

The I of the I-It relation is self-conscious in the sense of understanding itself in opposition to others; it is negatively defined. The I of the I-Thou, conversely, is positively defined. Whereas “[e]gos appear by setting themselves apart from other egos,” “[p]ersons appear by entering into relation with other persons.”¹³¹ Thus, the emergence of a new relation to oneself alters one’s subjectivity, which, due to the iterability of normativity, changes one’s visibility in society, thereby changing society itself.

Foucault’s insistence on “a constant care for the truth”¹³² implies that one *affects* truth, rather than reflecting or uncovering it. The movement from the will to knowledge, through which reality would be uncovered, to the will to truth, through which reality emerges as a social process, is what Foucault sees embodied in practices on the self.

¹³⁰ Buber, *I and Thou*, 112

¹³¹ Buber, *I and Thou*, 112

¹³² Foucault, “The Concern for Truth,” 304.

Referring to the S&M scene, Foucault notes that the possibilities suggested by this practice do not lie in the “uncovering” or “liberation” of violent and aggressive desires, but rather the creation of new forms of pleasure exterior to individual drives. This creation holds the possibility of freedom. A central problem in Foucault’s later works is why sexuality has become a moral problem.¹³³ Morality is understood to always have involved certain practices of the self, though these practices have changed drastically throughout time. In addressing this problem, he utters a fascinating phrase: “the same advice given by the ancient morality can work differently in the style of contemporary morality.”¹³⁴ Morality, understood as law, or, in Butler’s words, as a condition on and compulsion towards the subject’s ability to give an account of itself, can itself be approached stylistically, through an ethic of self care. In this case, and somewhat counter intuitively (though Foucault insists that we be wary of this ‘intuition’ we think we have), care can take the style of “an ethics of pleasure, of intensification of pleasure.”¹³⁵

Morality, understood as the place of law actuated through the techniques of the self engendered by particular relations between selves, is, like normativity, not something that can be discarded or ignored in considerations of freedom. However, Foucault in particular stresses that morality is open to different techniques of the self, techniques that are in evidence in antiquity yet must find contemporary expressions today in new forms. One form that is open for play today relates to the concept of kinship, to which we now turn.

¹³³ He makes this point in “The Return of Morality,” 328.

¹³⁴ Foucault, “The Return of Morality,” 323.

¹³⁵ Foucault, “An Interview With Stephen Riggins,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, Paul Rabinow, ed. (New York: The New Press, 1997), 131.

Kinship

[W]hat sustaining web of relations make our lives possible, those of us who confound kinship in the rearticulation of its terms?

Butler¹³⁶

Care of the self, and the stylistics of desires, imply an affinity to affective ties—or emotional bonds—particularly those that have traditionally been associated with kinship. Kinship, often posited to exist in pre-modern or apolitical relations—most notably the family—can take the form of care and be used as an effective troubling of the rationalist discourse that permeates modern subject formation. There is a sociological lineage that considers kinship in pre-social or proto-social terms in relation to the modern. The family, for example, is considered the primary social formation through which kin relations are present, yet this is qualitatively different than more abstract social relations in evidence in modern society. Butler examines the relation between kinship and political ties, showing how the effective troubling of the borders of the two categories can be a mode through which contemporary thought can rethink the concept of care and its relation to politics.

Butler makes the case that Western thought has the problematic of kinship versus political ties as a primary concern. In the figure of Antigone, the heroine of the famous Sophoclean play, Hegelian thought sees the inevitable subsuming of kinship ties to political law, in what is the inauguration of the modern state. Similarly, Antigone is used by Lacan to assert the primacy of the symbolic over the imaginary; thus, Antigone's death is a foregone conclusion when she radically disrupts the symbolic law under which she is subsumed.

¹³⁶ Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 24.

Butler, however, reads the figure of Antigone in a different way, which relates to the potential for kinship ties to trouble the political. Rather than positing strict binaries between political and kin-based law, Butler suggests that Antigone is a figure who herself troubles this binary. She is the niece of the king, thereby having a political connection to the state; she is not purely motivated by kinship ties when she defies her uncle and buries her brother, but rather knows she is making a visible political gesture; she acts knowing she will die (as it was prophesized years before), and therefore embodies a type of living death, something unaccountable, spectral, and disruptive. Ultimately, Butler argues that there is far more to the figure of Antigone than the struggle of two opposing laws, one of which falls before the other.

What, then, can her story, when appropriated in a certain way, indicate with regard to the potential for kinship ties today? The ethic of care, it seems, can be used politically. Antigone does not act altruistically, within an appeal to the higher good of kinship ties; nor does care need to be understood as altruistic love, outside of power instead of a particular vector of power. Rather, it is the effective blurring of kinship and politics *itself* that reveals the potential for disruption, and this is actualized through the concept of care. The figure of Antigone represents unrepresentability itself, or, rather, serves as a figure that can never be fully articulated through any current categories of representation. She acts, thereby exercising freedom, but she acts politically yet selfishly, carefully yet self-destructively, in the name of kinship but exclusively in relation to her brother, making it clear that the treatment of her other kin would not concern her. For

Butler, then, Antigone is a figuration of “that political possibility that emerges when the limits to representation and representability are exposed.”¹³⁷

The troubling of kin affiliation—how it works, and where—reveals the potential for new relations, new vectors through which care can flow. In his contemporary social milieu, Foucault speaks about the possibility of freedom within homosexual relations, not for the different ways sex is performed, but for the different affective ties they seem to engender. This may be a contemporary stage on which kinship becomes a political tool, in a particular practice of freedom.

In his time, Foucault saw homosexuality as a unique form of self-care with great potential for freedom. He stresses that “[h]omosexuality is a historic occasion to reopen affective and relational virtualities.”¹³⁸ It is not the sexual act between same sexes that is potentially disruptive, but the recasting of social relationships. It is in the spontaneous affective response embodied in homosexual practice where Foucault sees the opportunity for friendship. The cultivation of friendship, which requires a different way of relating to the other beyond sexual drives or legal-judicial processes, is a practice of freedom because it pushes the bounds through which we are expected to act and question ourselves through the hermeneutics of the self. Friendship does not seek to interiorize and define the nature of relations, but is open to many different possibilities, including sexual relations. Thus, in the homosexual “mode of life,” which is friendship, Foucault sees the possibility for disruption of “our rather sanitized society.”¹³⁹ We become aware of the

¹³⁷ Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, 2.

¹³⁸ Michel Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 138.

¹³⁹ Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life,” 136. (both quotations)

many ways we can understand, and give, pleasure to others. The proliferation of modes through which pleasure can flow is thus a specific practice in modern desubjectification.

Foucault notes that the historical treatment of homosexuality in 19th and 20th century in Europe provides an opportunity for homosexuality as a mode of social practice to open new possibilities today. It is precisely because the homosexual attitude has been subject to interdictions and legal sanctions that it holds fascinating potential. There are historical reasons why homosexuality has taken the mode of intensification of the sexual act itself¹⁴⁰; it needn't be this way, however. In fact, it may be that the "care of the self" in antiquity is somewhat reflected in the homosexual mode of relation today, which may signpost its potential for freedom.

Foucault makes the claim that sexuality, in the Greek and Roman period, was considered a "social pleasure,"¹⁴¹ not to advocate a return to Greco-Roman ways of understanding sexuality, but to effectively trouble the way sexuality as a private, intrinsic quality is imagined today. By beginning to consider sex as a public mode of relation, Foucault is attempting to rethink the ways in which subjects relate to each other, something Butler mirrors in her reflection on Antigone, as well as on the possibilities of sex in a public domain. She discusses how homosexuality needn't be understood in strict opposition to heterosexuality, but as "a subversive rearticulation of the symbolic."¹⁴² Further, Butler highlights the potential for performative operations of sex to trouble not only hetero-normativity, but kinship categories as well. In a reading of the film *Paris is*

¹⁴⁰ A point made in Michel Foucault, "Sexual Choice, Sexual Act," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 151.

¹⁴¹ Michel Foucault, "An Ethics of Pleasure," in *Foucault Live*, Sylvere Lotringer ed. (New York: Semiotext, 1989), 271.

¹⁴² Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 109.

Burning, Butler notes that what is interesting is the extent to which a performance can destabilize categories for understanding sexuality within homosexuality as well as without it. Simply “liberating” the homosexual, through the sanctioning of homosexual marriage, for example, is not the point.¹⁴³ Rather, the possibilities homosexual affiliation suggests are within the open-ended social practices they engender. An open-ended play with desires, a lived opening of the self, as a contestable terrain, is what Butler theorizes within melancholic identification, to which I now turn.

Melancholic Identification

There is no necessary reason for identification to oppose desire, or for desire to be fueled by repudiation...Indeed, we are made all the more fragile under the pressure of such rules, and all the more mobile when ambivalence and loss are given a dramatic language in which to do their acting out.

Butler¹⁴⁴

Within the understanding of melancholia, care of the self occurs within a psychic topography, with social effects, and is realized through social performance. The ethic of care, within Butler’s discussion of melancholia, moves to the level of culture, with interesting, though not unproblematic, results.

Butler theorizes the discursive possibilities within the melancholic subject, one who lives a certain death constantly, whose desire is foreclosed in normative frames of understanding. Melancholia Butler borrows from Freud in defining as the product of ungrieved loss. When a loss occurs, within the subject the desire that was felt for this lost object assumes a psychic form when it is not properly grieved. Speaking generally, melancholy is the continued attachment to a desire, which has psychic and social

¹⁴³ Note that Foucault argues that “a right, in its real effects, is much more linked to attitudes and patterns of behaviour than to legal formulations.” (“The Social Triumph of the Sexual Will,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 157.)

¹⁴⁴ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 149-150.

consequences; indeed, “the account of melancholy is an account of how psychic and social domains are produced in relation to each other.”¹⁴⁵ This attachment can be understood as a continual reliance on the inaugerative conditions for one’s social emergence as a subject, because the subject is formed precisely through a primary “loss”—its ability to ever fully “know” what it is, where it comes from, and what constitutes its emergence in a particular time and place. Thus, melancholic identification preserves the normative frame, of which primary attachment is a condition of speaking of this subject in the first place. In specific reference to gender, Butler reads the formation of the male gender through the ungrievable loss of the male as an object of desire. Considering hetero-normativity as the frame that conditions the visibility of the subject in society, Butler theorizes the heterosexual male as melancholic, continually refusing the masculine as an avenue for desire, often with violent results. However, in renouncing homosexuality, as a foreclosure that forms hetero-normative gender, homosexuality itself retains a certain power in discourse: “[t]he act of renouncing homosexuality thus paradoxically strengthens homosexuality, but it strengthens homosexuality precisely *as* the power of renunciation.”¹⁴⁶ The melancholia of the heterosexual man preserves homosexuality as a space through which social critique may operate.

The structure of melancholia thus offers potential for practices of freedom, through the ungrieved (and therefore open-ended) loss of a desire to exist socially. As an aspect of a becoming subject, melancholia is a liminal psychic space that can be potentially disruptive, particularly when it is *performed*, as in the case of drag. The possibility for a subject to allegorize a psychic space Butler sees as having fascinating

¹⁴⁵ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 167.

¹⁴⁶ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 143.

potential, though not unproblematically. This “allegory that works through the hyperbolic”¹⁴⁷ exposes the melancholy at the heart of heterosexual attachment, of the inability of heterosexuality to ever fully achieve its normative function. The exposure of the psychic ambivalence that functions as a condition of contemporary gender norms is disruptive precisely because it turns the ambivalence of subjectivity onto the normative subject himself, not on those who are typically cast as ‘outside’ the norm, existing in ambivalent social spaces.

In imagining “a culture of gender melancholy,”¹⁴⁸ Butler attempts to have her reflections on freedom implicate a communal practice in which society can participate. The performance of melancholic identity makes this aspect of normative gender construction visible, thereby holding the potential for the resolution of certain crises of subjectivity, chief among them the violence inflicted upon those non-normative identities, such as the persecution of homosexuals, or the refusal to publically mourn the victims of AIDS. Thus melancholic performance can presage mourning, wherein loss is grieved, and society adopts a more conciliatory, inclusive attitude:

The emergence of collective institutions for grieving are thus crucial to survival, to the reassembling of community, the reworking of kinship, the reweaving of sustaining relations. And insofar as they involve the publicization and dramatization of death, they call to be read as life-affirming rejoinders to the dire psychic consequences of a grieving process culturally thwarted and proscribed.¹⁴⁹

The “lived grieving” that occurs within melancholia implies an ethic of care because it begins from the loss inherent in the formation of the subject. Gender melancholia in particular is the stylization of the desire “to be,” which is a desire within

¹⁴⁷ Butler, “Critically Queer,” 237.

¹⁴⁸ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 140.

¹⁴⁹ Butler, “Critically Queer,” 236.

the subject that takes precedence over others.¹⁵⁰ Melancholia and care both signify the attempt to go beyond self-mastery, through which the subject could ever fully know itself—could ever fully “be” without always “becoming.” The performance within the practice of melancholic identification is an open-ended, lived acknowledgement of loss, one that raises the question of whose loss *counts* as loss in society. Loss in this sense is the inability to ever fully account for one’s own emergence as a subject—the loss of the ability to “know thyself”—which is something with which all subjects must reckon. Though in melancholic identification loss can never be truly acknowledged *per se*, what can be acknowledged is that loss itself constitutes our subjectivity. This opacity of the subject—its ultimate unknowability—will be further interrogated in the next chapter, when we see what it implies for Butler and Buber with regard to concern for the other, beyond concern for the self.

Beyond the Care of the Self

Man did not exist before having a fellow being.

Buber¹⁵¹

Foucault, in an interview near the end of his life, distinguishes three levels of his analysis of power in his works: strategic relations, techniques of government, and states of domination.¹⁵² The latter has been the primary mode through which power has been analyzed in the past, understanding power as the ability to impose one's will and investigating power at the state level, wherein individuals are understood to be either constrained or liberated by state actions. Techniques of government refer to the analysis

¹⁵⁰ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 7.

¹⁵¹ Buber, “The Word that is Spoken,” 105.

¹⁵² Foucault, “The Ethics of Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 299.

of Foucault's concern for "governmentality," the vast assemblages and techniques of governance that produce subjects as governable within subtle, daily practices of subject formation. It is within strategic relations, further divorced from state tactics of governance but no less invested with power, where Foucault situates his discussion on the ethics of concern for the self as a practice of freedom. The relations of power on the intersubjective and intrasubjective level are where novel ways can be explored in which one relates to oneself aesthetically and stylistically.

When we begin to probe Foucault's understanding of this level of analysis, we may begin to see the limits to his understanding of freedom, and the limits to self-care in general, understood to be invariably tactical and power-laden. Though the positing of a "limited freedom" is not a problem *per se*, but rather a reckoning with the foreclosures Nietzsche has made with respect to "unlimited freedom," Foucault nevertheless can be investigated to see where "the care of the self" refuses to go, which is into the sphere of the ethical claims made by the other, in the name of freedom.

At all times, the ethics of concern for the self rely exclusively on the intentionality of the individuated person, who can use and manipulate the vectors of power circulating in social relations. There is no suggestion that intentionality in the realization of freedom can come exterior to oneself; rather, the self uses exterior relations as objects in practices of freedom. Note Foucault's understanding of the temporality of self-care. First, one works on oneself, attempting to attain a self-mastery through a concerted, daily practice on oneself. Then, one seeks, through relations with others, to extend the ethic of care into social relations. Foucault affirms the distinction between the primary and secondary movements in freedom when he notes that "[c]are for others should not be put before the

care of oneself. The care of the self is ethically prior in that the relationship with oneself is ontologically prior."¹⁵³ Naturally, work on oneself requires negotiation with one's social world, which is necessitated by the social ontology of the subject in Foucault's theorization. And yet, Foucault maintains that the relationship to oneself is ontologically prior. How this is possible, and what implications this has for freedom, are two problems that need to be interrogated.

Foucault defines ethics as "the relation to oneself," which may seem counter-intuitive, and reaffirming the primary mode of freedom to be actualized in the relation to oneself, not others. The strategies of the self, conducted with others, on others, treat the other as a technology, just as oneself is similarly treated. Butler mobilizes power in this way as well. What is the problem with this? Does it entirely follow from the Foucault's work, or is there space left for freedom that Foucault himself does not navigate?

Perhaps to say that the subject is, from the beginning, *relational* is not to say that it is at all times *social*, or power laden. Foucault asserts that "in human relationships...power is always present."¹⁵⁴ Power is, in fact, synonymous with relation in this formulation. Thus, for Foucault, the problem of freedom and power is at all times technical and various discourses are examined for their utility, including oneself and others. This belies a certain Nietzschean lineage that remains in Foucault's concern for freedom. If all relations that exist are open to utility, they are pushes and pulls of power, and it is a privileged self who can manage these relations, emphasizing some, ameliorating others. The impetus remains the pursuit of self-mastery, albeit through social practices, not self-renunciation, open-ended, not absolute. Foucault asserts that "it

¹⁵³ Foucault, "The Ethics of Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," 287.

¹⁵⁴ "The Ethics of Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," 291-292.

is the power over oneself that thus regulates one's power over others."¹⁵⁵ What is mastered is not oneself as an object that can be completely revealed in discourse; nevertheless, the mastery that remains within the care of the self is mastery of the mode of self-making one privileges.

The example of the artist is illustrative. If self-work can be compared to the mode through which an artist shapes a sculpture, then clearly some artists are more skilled than others; their touch is defter, their ability to visualize their end product is superior, and their inborn abilities are better than others. At one point, Foucault defines power relations as "the strategies by which individuals try to direct and control the conduct of others."¹⁵⁶ Freedom is understood as a vector of power, and thus as strategy for directing the conduct of others. Perhaps this is the reason Foucault maintains a self-centered ethic in theorizing freedom, for if power is the strategic control of conduct, this is far less problematic when the strategies are directed upon oneself, as an ethical practice of care. Foucault sees the ethical practice of freedom conducted within novel relations to the social objects in the world, examining "care" as a specific mode through which freedom can be practiced in contemporary society. Butler's theorization of kinship and melancholia coalesce with Foucault on this point, and remain limited in the same way as Foucault's theorization, though Butler moves beyond this orientation, a point I expand upon later.

We must ask Foucault why we ought to understand freedom as rigorous work upon the self, or through the tactical deployment of kinship affiliation and affective drives. In what way is this contrary to the preoccupation with the subject in modern thought, and the attempt to rationalize its discourse? By situating the practice of freedom

¹⁵⁵ "The Ethics of Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," 288.

¹⁵⁶ "The Ethics of Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," 298.

in a rational sphere, Foucault, ironically, "[b]y maintaining a body prior to its cultural inscription, . . . appears to assume a materiality prior to signification and form."¹⁵⁷ This materiality, which is the self who is able to manipulate vectors of power self-consciously, remains the ground of Foucault's theory. This is less a problem for Foucault's work *per se* as something that goes unacknowledged in his ruminations on freedom.

Buber is critical of the positing of the self: "For the inmost growth of the self is not accomplished, as people like to suppose today, in man's relation to himself, but in the relation between the one and the other, between men; that is, preeminently in the mutuality of the making present."¹⁵⁸ To seek to care for oneself as a practice of freedom is to neglect the fundamental ontology of the human: that we are formed, primarily, *through* the other, in relation to the other.

For Buber, the care of the self would remain in the I-It relation. It yields fascinating potential for re-articulations of kinship and modes of relation to oneself, yet it is always limited. To seek to care for oneself is to objectify oneself, holding oneself exterior to oneself, in order to practice upon oneself. As self-care moves beyond limit experience, it seeks to acknowledge, to a degree, the socially-conditioned human. One's will is continually conditioned by manifestations of power, as discourse, that channel the will into certain avenues while foreclosing others. Thus, care indicates that the limits of freedom—one's conditioned nature—imply a humility of self work. Practices of freedom get channeled into aesthetics of the self, where one is created as a work of art, and into new affiliations, which yield new ways of regarding self and other, beyond proscribed lines of kinship and sexuality. It is when the care of the self begins (and thus ends) with

¹⁵⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 177.

¹⁵⁸ Buber, *Knowledge of Man*, 61.

the primacy of the self that regard for the primacy of the other is foreclosed, and this is a problematic movement.

What is the place of the other in Foucault's theory of subjection? Recognizing the ontological condition of one's emergence as requiring the other as a *primary* move, not ending (or beginning) with the assertion that "the relationship to oneself is ontologically prior"¹⁵⁹ as Foucault does, allows us to go beyond Foucault, and to follow his theorization of the modern subject to a place he does not go: concern for the other, prior to concern for the self, as a practice of freedom.

The following passage of Foucault is illustrative, as he outlines the move from self-care to care for others:

...if you take proper care of yourself, that is, if you know ontologically what you are, if you know what you are capable of, if you know what it means for you to be a citizen of a city, to be the master of a household in an *oikos*, if you know what things you should or should not fear, if you know what you can reasonably hope for and, on the other hand, what things should not matter to you, if you know, finally, that you should not be afraid of death—if you know all this, you cannot abuse your power over others.¹⁶⁰

In this understanding, freedom precedes relation to others, rather than involving others within practices of freedom itself. Freedom leads to equitable relations, rather than at all times involving equitable relations. Foucault is quite close to imagining the liberal subject when he offers this formulation, and Butler suggests the potential pitfalls of such an understanding. Understanding self-mastery as a precursor to relations with others assumes a subject who is able to fully account for itself, which, for Butler, is an untenable claim. Indeed the ability to account for oneself is invariably limited by others,

¹⁵⁹Foucault, "The Ethics of Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," 287.

¹⁶⁰ Foucault, "The Ethics of Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," 31.

specifically because the accounts we give are always actualized within the address of the other. Further, the fact that we orient our accounts to others (which is a condition of their failure to fully account for ourselves) is not only a negative reality, or a lack that inaugurates the subject. Rather, it may be pointing us toward a primary relational drive, moving the place of freedom from self-work to a mode of relation with the other.

Thus, a critique of Foucault leads us to the following question: Does the constitution of the subject not hint at a primary relational ontology of the human, which is in some way different from power in the way Foucault operates it? If indeed this is the case, then the question of freedom can be asked in the sphere of ethical relations to others. Are we called to act in freedom in ways that are prior or excessive to discourse, and can social theory interrogate this calling?

Chapter Four—Freedom and the Other: Navigating 'The Between'

Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something.

Butler¹⁶¹

In approaching the question of freedom in social thought today, I have worked through pre and post-Nietzschean lines of inquiry, attempting to convey a continuity of thought through which some impasses are resolved by other theorizations. In this chapter, I confront the following dilemma, to which the trajectory of thought I have followed brings me: the question of freedom, when asked in modern social thought, cannot posit a substantive subject that is either realized or constrained through social means. Neither can it privilege the rational capacities of the human as the only vector through which freedom can be realized. Freedom must be understood as a practice conducted within social relations, bound by a particular place and time, yet not reduced to solipsism, within the assertion that work upon the self comes prior to regard for others. How, then, to think and rethink freedom today? What theorizations may be helpful to navigate the potential pitfalls of this term?

We can not accept freedom as a pristine notion, divorced from historicity. Neither can we understand it as the assertion of the self, even if this is couched in terms of care, as it is with Foucault. At either end of the spectrum sit the subject who is at all times held to a meta-physical ideal (and for whom freedom means realizing or approximating this ideal), and the subject who at all times *creates* his/her own values (for whom freedom is fleeting, destructive, and, ultimately, relativistic). How do we navigate between these two realms? How do we walk the narrow ridge of freedom today? I turn to Butler and Buber,

¹⁶¹ Butler, *Prearious Life*, 23.

who link practices of freedom with regard for an other, as a *primary* move in their thought.

Ethical Implications of Relationality

[W]e come to exist...in the moment of being addressed, and something about our existence proves precarious when that address fails.

Butler¹⁶²

I highlight the relational ontology of the subject in Butler's work to see what ethical implications this ontology has for her work, and the question of freedom. In a previous chapter, I have discussed how the injurability of the subject, as a condition of its social existence, is something for Butler that cannot be overcome. This can be read as a check on Nietzsche's understanding of freedom as domination, and the creation of values outside of normative conditioning. What Butler's work implies is the extent to which Nietzsche himself should be included in his own theory of bad conscience; instead of situating freedom in the promise of one who can go beyond the mechanisms of subject formation in modernity, it is instead incumbent upon us to think through the conditions of emergence in the world, and have freedom take the form of social negotiation.

In the process through which subjection proceeds, we are made morally accountable agents by our response to an address from an other. If we accept that freedom does not involve refusing this moral accountability, engaging in the revaluation of all values that Nietzsche proscribes, then instead freedom itself must be understood within the frames that elicit and condition the accounts we give. Though the subject wishes to fully account for itself, this is not possible. For Butler, there are several

¹⁶² Butler, *Prearious Life*, 130.

inevitable vexations of any account we wish to give of ourselves, which would foreclose certain avenues of freedom:

There is (1) a non-narrativizable *exposure* that establishes my singularity, and there are (2) *primary relations*, irrecoverable, that form lasting and recurrent impressions in the history of my life, and so (3) a history that establishes my *partial opacity* to myself. Lastly, there are (4) *norms* that facilitate my telling about myself but that if do not author and that render me substitutable at the very moment that I seek to establish the history of my singularity. This last disposition in language is intensified by the fact that I give an account of myself to someone, so that the narrative structure of my account is superseded by (5) the *structure of address* in which it takes place.¹⁶³

These vexations make us vulnerable to the other, in a generalizable way, and indicate our precarious social position of intelligibility. Ironically, then, Butler posits the substitutability of the subject (in point four), as a vexation of any account one may attempt to give in its particularity, as a *generalizable* vexation itself. Thus she suggests that precarity as a generalizable condition must be at the heart of giving an account of oneself.

In a post-Nietzschean formulation, the subject is inaugurated through a primary vulnerability to the other, and freedom to this point has been an attempt to overcome this vulnerability, thereby affirming the self socially. However, as Butler notes, this vulnerability can be understood as not only fundamental to the constitution of the subject, but in a *productive* sense, recognizing that freedom cannot be understood as a mode of practice of the self on itself, but of a reality existing between self and other, which is opened precisely through vulnerability to the other.

¹⁶³ Butler, *Giving and Account of Oneself*, 39.

Drawing from Levinas, Butler reflects on how “the ‘face’ operates as catachresis” within sociality.¹⁶⁴ This face, in effect, represents unrepresentability, and in this way operates rhetorically as that which cannot be accounted for. It is a generalizable face, understood as “human suffering,” an interdiction against violence, and not a real, physical face, in Butler’s operation.¹⁶⁵ The face is a catachresis precisely because any attempt to fully recognize it will fail, which mirrors the extent to which any attempt for the subject to fully narrate itself similarly fails. Therefore, the face reminds us of the precariousness of life, and the interdependency of subjects, who can instigate violence upon each other yet are called not to, precisely by the face itself.

We can compare this phenomenon of the face to the act of giving an account of oneself, which places the subject within a moral frame of recognition, in which it is rendered accountable. The tension between desiring to relate, and the inevitably limited nature of the accounts we give, comprises, for Butler, not “ethical failure,” but “an indispensable resource for ethics.”¹⁶⁶ Consider that it is always a normative frame that conditions what accounts may be given, to whom, and who is rendered visible through them. Similarly, Butler asserts that the face we see is always framed in a particular way, and thus our call to relate is made intelligible in normative frames of understanding. The task becomes one of providing accounts of ourselves that embrace their limited capacities of self-narration, recognizing that the determination of what is a livable life is contestable terrain. Therefore, the work in which Butler herself is most recently engaging can be understood as providing a different account of the American subject, allowing for the

¹⁶⁴ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 133.

¹⁶⁵ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 144.

¹⁶⁶ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 40.

face of the Muslim, for example, to be considered a face that makes an ethical calling, and thus changing the account of American subjects themselves. Clearly, the act of revealing the fissures in knowledge and the mastery of the subject, particularly on the level of state politics, can have incredible violent reactionary results. This is the reason Butler writes *Precarious Life* in the first place, as a call toward reflecting on American vulnerability in the wake of the attacks on September 11th. She insists that when our precariousness is exposed (as with the terrorist attacks), the reflex that would seek to shore up the subject should be overcome, yielding to a reflection on our vulnerability in the face of the other. This is derived from the relational ontology of the subject she theorizes.

For Buber, the I of the I-It and the I of the I-Thou are related in a complex relational ontology as well: "Speaking subject-object language, we would have to say that the self exists *in itself* insofar as it exists *outside itself*, i.e., with the other."¹⁶⁷ The self that exists in itself is the I of the I-It relation, whereas the I that exists outside itself, in relation, comes into being when the word of I-Thou is spoken.

The ethical implications of this formulation come to reflect Butler quite well, as Buber similarly stresses that the ability to master oneself is inimical to relation, and ethics. The relation of I-Thou is always a process of coming and going, of willingness and grace; as Friedman notes: "The comings of the Thou are gracious not because we are entirely dependent upon grace, but because we cannot will both sides of the dialogue. Its goings are solemnly sad because we must return to the world of It."¹⁶⁸ This return, which

¹⁶⁷ Robert E. Wood, *Martin Buber's Ontology: An Analysis of I and Thou* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 71.

¹⁶⁸ Friedman, *Encounter on the Narrow Ridge*, 131.

is eternal (echoing Nietzsche), is the source of the melancholy of the subject, as all true relation returns to the world in particularity. Nevertheless, this melancholy is not something to be overcome except temporarily, and the ethical call of the other must be heeded.

Butler and Buber go further than simply including all subjects in the process of subject formation (as a critique of Nietzsche). Butler theorizes that the inauguration of the subject through normative frames indicates not only the limits on the subject to master itself, but a *desire* to relate, in the psycho-analytic sense. The positing of a primary desire to relate, though Butler remains hesitant in making this move, has many implications for her ethics.

As previously shown, the conceptualizations of freedom that are post-Nietzschean nevertheless rely upon his concept of Will, which is a desire to dominate and realize oneself in the world in Nietzsche's understanding. However, the Will can be recast as a desire "to be," whatever social form this may take; this displaces the will to dominate as a primary drive at the heart of the human impulse, and replaces it with the desire to relate, precisely because "to be" means to already be thrown into the world, given over to terms of recognition that are not one's own. Butler's most recent work makes an attempt to imagine a "dialogic form of social ontology,"¹⁶⁹ though she ultimately problematizes the practical significance of the term, turning to a reflection on the generalizability of harm, and the ethical injunction this makes (or should make) in political relations. Buber similarly asserts that "the longing for relation is primary,"¹⁷⁰ and remains embedded within this understanding, as, for him, the human is born with the desire and ability to

¹⁶⁹ Butler, *Frames of War*, 140.

¹⁷⁰ Buber, *I and Thou*, 78.

exist in relation to an other. Without the other, and recognition of such, no I exists. Buber is also positing the uniqueness of every human being, as the existence of an I and an other must include some level of discernability between the two. The human—indeed, everything, from animals to inanimate objects—is unique; he/she is situated in a particular time and place, and that forms an essential part of who he/she is. This move imagines freedom not as a social practice, but as a social relation, highlighting the small but important difference between the two. Social practice is conducted by a self, upon a self and others; relation begins with “the two,” refusing a self prior to this instantiation. Thus, the “I” of which Buber speaks cannot be understood apart from the word pair to which it belongs—I-It or I-Thou. The I only is present in relation, and this relation is a primary impulse.¹⁷¹

Freedom and Ethics

The kindling of the response, which occurs time and again, to the unexpectedly approaching speech, we term responsibility.

Buber¹⁷²

There is an important difference between Buber and Butler’s understanding of ethics that should be addressed at this point. As previously discussed, Butler relies on precarity as a generalizable condition of subject formation, and has the injurability of the subject inform her ethics. Buber is sympathetic to this orientation to a degree, yet ultimately asserts that the other in ethics is always real, particular, and present. The generalizable condition of vulnerability has implications for how Butler can be read with respect to the intersections of ethics and freedom in her work.

¹⁷¹ This is explained on page 54 of *I and Thou*.

¹⁷² Martin Buber, “Education,” in *Between Man and Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 109.

Butler clearly moves toward ethical deliberations beyond the practices of resignification she espouses in earlier work. In texts such as *Giving an Account of Oneself*, *Precarious Life*, and *Frames of War*, Butler is increasingly concerned with the ethical implications of the injurability of the subject, and the capacity for violence that must be mitigated in the world. However, the question remains to what extent her earlier theorizations of freedom are consonant with her later, ethical deliberations, or to what extent there is a disjuncture between her theorization of freedom and her theorization of ethics. She writes: “We do not need to ground ourselves in a single model of communication, a single model of reason, a single notion of the subject before we are able to act.”¹⁷³ Here, Butler hints that freedom as troubling the normative and ethics as making a normative injunction need not exist in tension. Is this convincing? What does the generalizable injury of the subject in its formation imply as a normative framework for ethics?

Butler’s theorization of ethics represents a disjuncture with her theorization of freedom precisely because of her movement to the generalizability of precariousness, from which she attempts to build a normative political project. While in her reflections on freedom Butler works on the limits of the normative, opening spaces of contestation through which political practices can change normative frames, however temporary, in her ethical deliberations she is clearly driven by a different impetus. This impetus is the amelioration of violence, and the push for equality that would redress the social mechanisms that make some subjects more harmable than others. Certainly, this is an admirable project, and I do not mean to demean this project. However, Butler’s

¹⁷³ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 48.

theorization of freedom would seem to have a measure of violence inherent within it, if violence is understood as the risk of unintelligibility when normative discourse is troubled. In moving toward injurability as a generalizable condition, yet being concerned for those who are more injurable today than others, Butler appears to wish to replace contemporary normative discourse with another normative discourse, rather than prize the spaces of contestation that are always present as a function of power, yet are always nevertheless unstable, and therefore somewhat violent.

Butler's theory approaches that moment when discourse breaks down, when words dissolve, hinting at something in excess to the normative frames of intelligibility. This excess is the place of ethics, and Butler stresses that moving from “recognition” toward “apprehension” of life acknowledges the excess that is outside discourse. She writes that,

“Recognition” is the stronger term, one that has been derived from Hegelian texts and subject to revisions and criticisms for many years. “Apprehension” is less precise, since it can imply marking, registering, acknowledging without full cognition. If it is a form of knowing, it is bound up with sensing and perceiving, but in ways that are not always—or not yet—conceptual forms of knowledge.¹⁷⁴

We must carefully understand what is driving this movement from recognition to apprehension in her theorization. Apprehension seeks to acknowledge, to whatever degree it is possible, that some things can never be known about oneself and others. This would seem to lead toward a more humble orientation toward oneself and others, something Butler stresses is absolutely necessary in the contemporary political climate. Apprehension thus emerges out of the *limits* of possible relations, rather than as a way to grasp the excess that always is present in relation. This is the precise moment of

¹⁷⁴ Butler, *Frames of War*, 4-5.

disjuncture between Butler's freedom and her ethics: freedom attempts to grasp and redirect the excess that exists as a condition of power; ethics attempt to grasp the lack inherent in relation, and within the constitution of the subject him/herself. Butler's assertion that "we are undone by each other"¹⁷⁵ imagines ethics emerging out of a negative relation, a frustration of the desire to master oneself. However, as Butler herself hints, ethics may be conceived as a consummation of the desire to relate, rather than the frustration to dominate, though she does not fully theorize this potential. Part of the reason for this foreclosure is that Butler wishes to remain within discourse when theorizing ethics, being driven to change the normative liberal discourse of war in America. In this way, Butler neglects to consider that the desire "to be" can be consummated in a non-discursive place, which means that it is inaccessible to theorization, yet is no less real for that.

In the section above, I noted how Butler comes close to having the desire for relation form the heart of her ethical deliberations. This move, I believe, would ease some tensions in her work, yet it is not a move she fully makes, possibly because she wishes to retain the power of her injunction on a political level, appealing to a limit on American aggression in the world, which is an admirable aim. However, the excess Butler sees arising as a result of social interaction can be pushed into a more positive modality than what apprehension seeks to grasp, and I turn now back to Buber, who puts this excess at the heart of his theory, within the I-Thou relation. What then happens to freedom when

¹⁷⁵ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 23.

we move the moment of ethics from the inaugurative phrase “Is it you?” (where Butler places it¹⁷⁶) to “It is You” (where Buber places it)?

The Between

How would man exist if God did not need him?

Buber¹⁷⁷

The above quotation is a wonderful parallel to Nietzsche’s assertion that there would be nothing to create if God existed. Rather than understanding freedom in opposition to an ethical calling, Buber turns Nietzsche on his head, asserting that existence itself is a calling to act, and to make freedom present.

The reality that exists in the I-You relation Buber calls “the between.” Wood asserts that “[i]f, *per impossible*, one were to remove the subjective and objective elements from it, the Between for Buber would still exist as a surplus, for it is the place where the Transcendent is present in the world.”¹⁷⁸ The between is actualized when the human utters the word, which itself is the “sphere of the between,”¹⁷⁹ coming into being only through a mutual recognition between others. The word is not spoken into air, as a monologue, but directed toward an other; it is nonexistent without this other. Likewise, the between is experienced between an I and a Thou, fully present in totality. The totality of the human can not be arrived at through summation, for this very reason. The between is irreducible, as is the human. There is a transcendent mystery to reality that is

¹⁷⁶ See, for example, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, where Butler has this question form the crux of her ethical deliberations. It is when we are called to answer such a question that we are made accountable, ethical subjects.

¹⁷⁷ Buber, *I and Thou*, 130.

¹⁷⁸ Wood, *Martin Buber's Ontology*, 110-111.

¹⁷⁹ Wood, *Martin Buber's Ontology*, 38.

inaccessible except through the reality of the between, which, due to the particularities in which discourse operates, is inaccessible to practices of articulation.

“The between” is a fascinating theorization of freedom for the paradoxes it navigates. In attempting to ask the question of freedom, the tendency is to either situate freedom individually (as action) or collectively (as community). Foucault and Butler grasp that there is a complex interplay between the individualistic human (the self) and the collective (organized as normativity). Butler attempts to push this interplay into the pre-discursive, yet she is hesitant in doing so, wishing to retain the rhetorical efficacy of freedom, with must therefore appear in discourse. Buber proposes that the between is a third way of navigating this problematic, retaining the intentionality of the human, requiring its consummation by an other through confirmation, and pointing toward a space is something more than the sum of its parts. He asserts the difference between “experience” and “the between”:

“Between” is not an auxiliary construction, but the real place and bearer of what happens between men; it has received no specific attention because, in distinction from the individual soul and its context, it does not exude a smooth continuity, but is ever and again re-constituted in accordance with men’s meetings with one another; hence what is experience has been annexed naturally to the continuous elements, the soul and its world.¹⁸⁰

Whereas Butler interrogates words as invariably establishing a limited relation, Buber stresses that the basic word "Thou" establishes a relation of totality to totality, a free relation. Buber’s theorization requires the mutuality of the making-present, beyond the positivity that Nietzsche would imagine in the actualization of freedom. Buber writes:

¹⁸⁰ Buber, “What is Man?”, 241.

"The You confronts me. But I enter into a direct relationship to it. Thus the relationship is at once being chosen and choosing, passive and active."¹⁸¹

The category of "Man" for Buber, if it is to maintain any insight into freedom, must be understood differently than in the past, wherein one found the essence of the human, working deductively from this essence. In the beginning, "Man" must be understood for what exists between humans, not within them. For someone who is driven by the question "what is man?" to go beyond "man" in this way is a fascinating move.¹⁸² It causes Buber to assert that, in thinking about modernity, "we begin to recognize the crisis of man as the crisis of what is between man and man."¹⁸³

It may seem as if Buber is lamenting the existence of the It-world, by positing the reality of the between and encounter through true relation; it is quite the contrary. He emphasizes the importance of the world of It, as the place for the human to exist in place and time. There is no ideal-typical state in which the It-world is overcome, or transcended, except insofar as the between is actualized, temporarily, in the It-world itself. Though the longing for relation is primary in the human, it is not everything. Particularities exist with which the subject must reckon; one cannot simply spurn the temporal world and hope to find true existence in this way. Buber has no patience for the world of ideas; the actual human being is what matters, not any abstraction which posits truth exterior to the temporal, lived world. Truth is grounded in "the *a priori* of

¹⁸¹ Buber, *I and Thou*, 124-125.

¹⁸² One is reminded of Foucault's essay "What is Enlightenment?", which similarly takes the question of enlightenment and recasts it in a productive way. Buber, like Foucault, wishes to recapture the efficacy of a term in pushing it into new vectors of inquiry. Foucault overcomes the enlightenment tradition while ruminating on its assumptions; Buber, likewise, in making the question of man of central concern, overcomes its belabored search for an essential human.

¹⁸³ Martin Buber, "Elements of the Interhuman," in *Knowledge of Man* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 67.

relation,"¹⁸⁴ yet is situated in a particular time and place. The between helps capture freedom and ethics, actualized within a social space, yet tenuously held and never generalizable from the moment it occurs.

It is important at this late juncture to note that I do not wish to distill an understanding of transcendence—what some would call God—from Buber's work.¹⁸⁵ The consideration of what Buber dubs the "Eternal You" cannot but be at the core of his thought, accessible only through the I-Thou relation, as an emergent phenomenon. However, Buber's understanding of God, who is accessed through dialogue, must be carefully considered. If a particular religious conviction cannot be distilled or elided from Buber's thought, neither can the presence of God in his thought instigate the wholesale dismissal of his theory. Buber, when considering whether he believed in God, uttered a most telling phrase: "If to believe in God means to be able to talk *about* him in the third person, then I do *not* believe in God. But if to believe in him means to be able to talk *to* him, then I do believe in God."¹⁸⁶ The eternal Thou, if it is God, is actualize only through meeting, not abstraction, and this point shows a clear difference between the normative, transcendent God to which most Christian doctrines hold.

For Buber, freedom is a process, not a state. It involves a relation with the other, at all times fleeting. It also cannot be planned. There are no tactics one can employ, no intentionality in this respect. The dual thrusts of will and grace must be present for a free relation to occur. The only intentionality involved is one of openness to the totality of the

¹⁸⁴ Buber, *I and Thou*, 79

¹⁸⁵ This is something Butler attempts vis-à-vis Levinas, particularly in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, attempting to retain Levinas' concept of "the face" as an interdiction on violence, yet refusing the divine origin from which Levinas generates this interdiction.

¹⁸⁶ Buber, quoted in *Encounter on the Narrow Ridge*, 78.

other, a willingness to be fully present in the here and now. There are no short cuts to this relation, and any attempts to facilitate the I-Thou relation will fail, because they involve particularities in the form of tactics. Thus, the freedom Foucault envisions, which is inevitably tactical, is exceeded (though not necessarily foreclosed) in this understanding. For Buber, freedom is fundamentally incoherent, because it exists in the I-Thou relation, which is inaccessible to the particularities which make something coherent in thought, amenable to conceptual frameworks, and articulatable in speech:

The It-world coheres in space and time.
The You-world does not cohere in either.¹⁸⁷

Contrast this to the *coherency* of freedom in Foucault, the fact that freedom is invariably power laden, filtered through the particular vectors of power present in a certain socio-political context. For Buber, the effects of freedom may be (and almost always are) socially disruptive, in terms of producing new ways of relating, and altering social forms. However, this is not freedom, but rather its effects. Similarly, whereas Butler interrogates words as invariably establishing a limited relation, therein situating our ethical calling in the world (though as a generalizable injunction), Buber stresses that the basic word “Thou” opens a relation of totalities, a free relation, yet never in excess to the particular relation in which it is established.

Is this a refusal of Nietzsche’s injunction, or its consummation? I argue that it is the latter, as the theorization of the I-Thou relation allows for the critique of transcendent, ahistorical freedoms, yet overcomes the monological character of Nietzsche’s radical freedom. Simply because the modern subject exists in monologic relations, this does not

¹⁸⁷ Buber, *I and Thou*, 148.

mean that it always must be so, nor does it mean that dialogue is not occurring, outside our ability to grasp its forms (where it cannot but be).

Further, dialogic freedom must exist in tension with the modern world, and its effects would change the solidity of concepts and relations that come to characterize the modern. There is great risk in the opening necessitated by the I-Thou relation, as, for Buber, “[the it-world] breaks, or it breaks me.”¹⁸⁸ When one opens oneself to the possibility of the between, there is great risk that this opening will be met with violence, which is a mismeeting that is lamentable, because it does not allow for the primary desire for relation to be satisfied, however temporary. Thus, for Buber, “one cannot do evil with his whole soul, [yet] one can do good only with the whole soul.”¹⁸⁹ It must be stressed again, however, that goodness exists between humans, not within them.

In keeping with the author's own philosophy, Buber's *I and Thou* is pertinent to a particular time and place in history: the Western world and the Death of God. Buber allowed his text to stand largely as it had been originally published for this reason, insisting that *I and Thou* had been written in a time of inspiration, and any drastic reworking would rob it of this fact. What then are the implications for the modern subject, born out of Buber's philosophy and concept of the free relation? In his book, Buber is deeply troubled by the growth of the It-world in modern Western society. The appearance of true, unmediated relations has diminished due to increased institutionalization, technological advancement, and the primacy of reason, which does not encounter the totality of existence. Nevertheless, the potential for free relations exists. Wood notes that "Buber will later emphasize the distinction between relation (Beziehung)

¹⁸⁸Buber, *I and Thou*, 61.

¹⁸⁹ Martin Buber, “Guilt and Guilt Feelings,” in *Knowledge of Man* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 126.

and meeting (Begegnung). The latter suggests the fleeting character involved in the actual realization of the Thou-relation; the former is of wider extension, including the latent state of openness, preparedness, commitment.¹⁹⁰ Thus we can differentiate between freedom, as a relation, and the effects of free relations. Buber's theory paints a picture of an open, committed society, which is amenable to true relationality, though not "free" in and of itself. Buber holds great hope for the intersubjective creation of freedom, a reality that cannot exist in the It world yet nevertheless can come to inform it. In this way, he imagines a kind of "inductive normativity," wherein social relations emerge out of the I-Thou relation and come to form the apparatus of morality, though as permanently contestable terrain. In this way, the only society worth living in is perpetually in crisis.

A careful consideration of Buber's nuanced notion of freedom as contingent, temporary, yet transformative may yield a deeper appreciation as to how to find new ways of living as modern subjects. In communicating the imperative behind his ideas, Buber's own words sing beautifully:

when I mean freedom and necessity not in the worlds that are thought of but in the actuality in which I stand before God; when I know, "I have been surrendered" and know at the same time "It depends on me," then I may not try to escape from the paradox I have to live by relegating the irreconcilable propositions to two separate realms; neither may I seek the aid of some theological artifice to attain some conceptual reconciliation: I must take it upon myself to live both in one, and lived both are one.¹⁹¹

The path Buber leads us toward is narrow indeed, yet it is the ground on which freedom may stir today.

¹⁹⁰ Wood, *Martin Buber's Ontology*, 56.

¹⁹¹ Buber, *I and Thou*, 144.

Conclusion

The task of speaking the truth is an infinite labor.

Foucault¹⁹²

In this thesis, I have aimed to present an argument that is logically consistent and earnest in its attempt to grapple with the question of freedom in our contemporary times. The question of freedom in social thought cannot be “answered” by way of the essence of freedom arriving, like a flash of light, into our minds, then disseminated in the world. If indeed the modern subject is thrown into the relations that simultaneously condition and are the condition for freedom itself, and this paradox cannot be overcome, only acknowledged, then the question itself changes even as we ask it. What space is then reserved for we who attempt to theorize freedom, seeking to have it hold some conceptual place?

What the above discussion may suggest is the extent to which the question of freedom, when asked in earnest, seeks to undo social theory itself, and its attempt to describe, know, and enact the social world. Freedom, it would seem, is always beyond our ability to apprehend it, as a non-discursive excess that is only articulatable when it is gone. This would seem to be what Foucault, Butler, and Buber in particular, would suggest. This does not mean, however, that it is not *real*, but that our situatedness, and the particularities with which we communicate in discourse, foreclose any attempt to understand or talk about freedom beyond the non-narrativizable moment in which it is present. Where do we find a place in theory for the intersections of freedom, ethics and

¹⁹² Foucault, “The Concern for Truth,” 308.

subjectivity, and what do Foucault, Butler and Buber suggest about the possibility for such a space?

Certainly, I would argue that the Nietzschean injunction that powers this argument must be heeded. Rather than positing an essential self, social theory can maintain its efficacy in investigating what occurs between subjects, even as forces of power condition how these subjects themselves appear to us. Further, what the above discussion suggests is not a wholesale dismissal of liberty, emancipation, and agency *per se*, but rather their universalizing tendencies. Nor does it suggest that the various inflections of freedom can be used as technologies for the furtherance of intended social goals and the greater good, as a utilitarian impulse may have us believe. The task may be to illuminate the unacknowledged positions on which certain mobilizations of freedom rely, not to replace some concepts with others, but enable the opening that is engendered by the turning away from our taken-for-granted notions of freedom, modernity, and the subject. This open-ended turning from truth is a practice of truth, though, as Foucault notes, infinite in nature. While it may be a practice of freedom itself, it also induces us to consider that there are relationships that dissolve at the moment we attempt to make sense of them, because we invariably establish a different relation through this operation.

I would be remiss at this late juncture not to comment on the prospect for social theory to contribute to a new, better society, within the current discussion as I have framed it. I reintroduce the utopian aims of freedom to open, rather than answer, the question as to how our understanding of freedom today comes to inform how we can live a better life together in modern society. The individualist positions presented above *vis-à-vis* freedom, even Butler and Buber's ethics being placed on the level of intersubjectivity,

rather than a larger scale, makes a more ambitious political project extremely difficult to imagine.¹⁹³ And yet, is this completely foreclosed within the present discussion? Can a different sort of politics emerge out of a different social imaginary, which the question of freedom may open?

This would be my hope. If asking the question of freedom as I have implies that we are called to respond to others and the world in ways that exceed our capacities for articulation, then a new politics cannot be rationally thought-through and realized in the world. However, ensuring that spaces exist through which we are able and open to heed the call of the other would mean that what is created in the between cannot be anticipated, yet carries the promise of something new, unstable, and truly wonderful. Something more than what we can comprehend exists beyond any frame of recognition, and the humility engendered by this realization may be the place that the question of freedom holds in contemporary social thought and political action. Indeed, asking the question of freedom reveals that the only proper social practice of inquiry is perpetually in crisis, open to the dissolution of its drive for knowledge, into something beyond, on the horizon of our being.

¹⁹³ As I discuss above, Butler does attempt to construct a larger political project within her more recent works. However, she is problematic in doing so, the reasons for which are laid out in chapter four.

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