

About the origin and importance of Foucault's four aspects of subjectivation

Steven Dorrestijn

[Excerpts in provisional English translation from a text published in Dutch as:

Dorrestijn, S. (2023) [Met Foucault over subjectivering, verleiding en techniek](#). *Algemeen Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Wijsbegeerte*, 115(1), 100-113.

Introduction

...

The posthumous publication of *Confessions of the Flesh* means the addition of a chapter on the Christian period in the project on sexuality, but it also means a new chapter regarding the development of the approach to subjectivation. This article addresses the question of what *Confessions of the Flesh* adds to Foucault's approach to ethical subjectivation and how this is relevant for application in the ethics of technology. An important intermediate step concerns clarifying and reconstructing Foucault's development of a framework for subjectivation with four aspects.

Ethics as subjectivation

The Use of Pleasures, Part II of the *History of Sexuality*, begins with an 'Introduction' that is also intended for *The Care of Self* (Part III) and also for *Confessions of the Flesh* (Part IV). In that 'Introduction', Foucault discusses changes in his research. Whereas his approach up to and including Part I, *The Will to Know*, focused on 'knowing' and 'power', he now wants to focus on the 'self'. He now characterises his *History of Sexuality* as a development history of 'the man of desire' (*UP...*). This means that the notion of the 'subject', always criticised by Foucault, returns, not in the sense of a theory of a transcendental subject, however, but as thematisation of one's own experience and practices in relation to oneself: becoming a subject, 'subjectivation'.

...

Framework with four aspects of subjectivation

For a structured description of ways of becoming a moral subject and of historical shifts therein, Foucault introduces four aspects of subjectivation. Foucault explains this fourfold scheme only briefly, one paragraph for each aspect. Then he summarises. Subjectivation means:

[...] the constituting of the self into a 'moral subject', in which [1] the individual proceeds to delimit the part of himself that constitutes the object of his moral practice and in which [2] it determines his position in relation to the precept to which he conforms, [4] establishes for himself a particular mode of being that will count as moral self-fulfilment. [3] To this end, the individual works on himself, seeks to know himself; to this end, he checks and tests, perfects and transforms himself (*UP...*).

The numbering in brackets, here and further in this article, was added by me and serves to make the framework more clearly identifiable. There is no fixed order of the aspects. To schematise, I list the aspects in the most common order:

- [1] ethical substance,
- [2] mode of subjection,
- [3] ethical elaboration,
- [4] teleology.

The same dimensions of subjectivation are also introduced in Dreyfus and Rabinow's 1983 interview 'On the genealogy of ethics' with Foucault (*GE...*)¹. Furthermore, Foucault nowhere explicitly mentions the aspects.

The brief explanations in the 'Introduction' and in 'On the genealogy of ethics' are sufficient for being able to follow Foucault's use of the aspects in the running text there. However, the meaning of the terms per se and the scope of the framework do not become immediately clear. Therefore, in order to help the reader in my text, I now provide an

¹ Note that this title is a variation on Nietzsche's 'genealogy of morality' where, however, Foucault centres his approach to 'ethics' as 'subjectification'.

explanation in which I draw on Foucault's introductory formulations (*UP...*; *GE...*) but also already slightly anticipate the additional reflections further on in this text.

- [1] The 'ethical substance' is the conception of ourselves, or our behaviour, as the material to be processed for self-formation. What does the self consist of, how is its own existence problematised, made the subject of moral care and adjustment?
- [2] The 'mode of subjection' is about the relationship to regulations to which one recognises oneself as bound, conforms. In what way does one feel called, motivated, obliged towards a precept, model, principle? What is the motivating reason for ethical subjectivation?
- [3] The aspect of 'ethical elaboration' or 'asceticism' is about the work on oneself, the efforts, exercises, 'self-techniques' by which one realises a certain ethical attitude and practices a way of life.
- [4] The aspect of 'teleology' indicates the pursued way of being, the goal state, completion, or fulfilment of the self.

Although the framework is introduced almost casually by Foucault, I think it does deserve emphatic attention. The four aspects of subjectivation form a central framework in Foucault's most recently written and life-published work. In *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of Self*, the four aspects structure the presentation of the study. In sections that are methodical or concluding in nature, Foucault provides summaries based on the four dimensions of subjectivation – regularly anticipating the interpretation of the schema for the Christian period.

...

Origin and importance of the framework?

Although little noted, it is still noteworthy that Foucault nowhere explains the development or importance of the four aspects of subjectivation, either in published work or in the archives with unpublished writings. I know of no secondary literature specifically on research into the framework. Researchers who explicitly highlight the framework and apply it themselves in their own research such as Rabinow (2000) and O'Leary (2002) do not elaborate on its origins. As long as no new information emerges from the archives, my reflections on the framework remain

an attempt at reconstruction. However, this reconstruction can help to better understand the four aspects as well as the philosophical importance and scope of the framework.

To begin with the dating: the fourfold framework of subjectivation appears to be a novelty in Foucault's work from 1983-1984. After all, with the publication of *Confessions of the Flesh*, it appeared that the scheme did not figure in the published manuscript written in 1980-1982, while the quoted excerpts from 1983-1984² show that it would become part of a final version.

A further point concerns the term 'subjectivation'. For his investigation of subjectivation, Foucault prefers the neutral-sounding term '*subjectivation*' in favour of the much more common but one-sidedly negative-sounding '*assujétissement*' (submission). In the manuscript of *Confessions of the Flesh*, the literal term 'subjectivation' occurs once. That is to say, it concerns a note in which the editor of the text has included a fragment that Foucault erased (in 1984?). The fragment is hardly comprehensible, but it is clear that Foucault proposes 'processes of subjectivation' as an overarching concept within which moral 'codes' and 'behaviours' converge (*CF...*). There is not a fourfold framework of subjectivisation here, but a dualistic schema with moral code and moral behaviour, as the objective and subjective sides of morality.

A further clue about the meaning and development of the framework is found in *The Use of Pleasures*, when Foucault gives a casual, one-off variation on the terminology for the four aspects: 'ontology, deontology, asceticism and teleology.' (*UP...*). Foucault uses the terms [3] 'ascetics' and [4] 'teleology' more often; [1] 'ontology' and [2] 'deontology' figure only here.

What is the connection between deontology, or the doctrine of duty, and [2] 'mode of subjection'? Duty, either founded in reason (Kant), or as obedience to divine laws, is the most pronounced form of the 'mode of subjection'. However, a decisive step in Foucault's late work is that he will explore how another mode of subjection is possible: ethics as an art of existence that without duty and coercion equally provides 'a solid structure of existence' (*GE...*)

In the notions of 'ontology' and 'substance', we recognise two important concepts related to the (metaphysical) question of being. Foucault applies these concepts to one of his aspects of ethics, namely [1] the conception of what the self consists of. The term he coined for this is 'ethical substance', but on this single occasion he opts for 'ontology' (of subjectivation). This

² Excerpts from *The Use of Pleasures* and *The Care of the Self* about the four aspects of subjectivation which also make reference to how the material of *Confessions of the Flesh* would fit into the scheme.

provides a possible clue to the meaning and scope of the schema, as the term 'ontology' here introduces a cross-reference between *History of Sexuality* and Foucault's social-critical philosophy. Indeed, the 1984 essay 'What is Enlightenment?' talks about philosophy as a critical 'ontology of the self' (*WE...*).

However, the most important indication about the origin of the framework comes not from Foucault himself but from Gilles Deleuze, who in his book on Foucault points out its similarity to Aristotle's four causes: material cause, formal cause, efficient cause, final cause (Deleuze 1986: 112)³. If we follow this suggestion, as for example O'Leary (2002) does, this provides a way of interpreting Foucault's framework. Subjectivation can then be understood as 'self-causation', with four aspects⁴:

- [1] a conception of what the self is, the processable material of the self,
- [2] a model or principle for subjectivation, a motivating reason,
- [3] the required work on the self,
- [4] what it produces, the fulfilment of self that is strived for.

While there is a striking resemblance, it remains unsure whether Foucault consciously constructed his framework along the lines of Aristotle's four causes. But even without a definite answer, the similarity remains. Foucault's ethics, through this connection with Aristotle's metaphysics, becomes linked to the core the history of philosophy. Note, however, that Foucault's framework does not address a metaphysical theory of being, but a history of subjectivation.

For the philosophy of technology, this connection is even more fascinating because Aristotle's four causes are also central in Martin Heidegger's *Die Frage nach der Technik* (1962). Heidegger's critique of technology is that the concept of causation in our time has been narrowed to a technical, mechanistic way of thinking, according only to the efficient cause. He refers to this as the 'forgetting of being' and technology is identified as 'the greatest danger' in this

³ Deleuze immediately attributed great importance to the diagram. In the seminars he devoted to Foucault in the 1985-1986 academic year, prior to his 1986 book, he repeatedly emphasised the three 'axes' (knowing, power, self) for schematizing Foucault's work, and on the latter axis the four 'modes' of subjectivation (see <https://deleuze.cla.purdue.edu/seminars/foucault>).

⁴ Note that the most common order in Foucault's diagram corresponds to the most common order of Aristotle's four causes.

analysis. Heidegger hardly sees a way out, because any search for a 'solution' unfortunately means an intensification of precisely the technical way of thinking. For rescue, we can only hope for the 'illumination' of another way of thinking.

This connection between Foucault and Heidegger is probably not accidental. Indeed, in 'On the origins of the hermeneutics of the self', Foucault makes a rare reference to Heidegger precisely at this point:

According to Heidegger, it was because of an increasing obsession with *techné* as the only access to understanding things that the West lost contact with Being. Let us turn the question around and ask what techniques and practices shape the Western concept of the subject (...) (Foucault 1999: 161) [*to be updated/adapted*].

Foucault continues in this 1980 lecture related to *Confessions of the Flesh* with a proposal for critical philosophy as an enquiry into the 'conditions' that have historically shaped our existence and, at the same time, into the 'indeterminate possibilities for transforming ourselves' (idem). This is precisely the approach in 'What is Enlightenment?': 'an historical analysis of the limits imposed on us and an examination of possibilities for transcending them' (*WE...*). This framework is very apt for ethics and technology: examining the formative impact of technology on our existence, with the simultaneous aim of finding in it possibilities for transforming our existence.

In line with Heidegger, but even more radical, Foucault thinks from the perspective of human existence, namely according to the approach of ethical subjectivation. Foucault's approach thereby refers to the same structure of four causes that Heidegger also uses, but he turns Heidegger's analysis inside out. Technology does not essentially mean a danger to the human subject. Technology always plays a mediating role in subjectivation, in the fullness still of the four dimensions of causation, with an indeterminate outcome. Foucault's four aspects of subjectivation can help understanding the subject beyond essentialist and dualist approaches.⁵

⁵ This view is partly inspired by Graham Harman's (2009, 101-103) philosophical consideration of 'quadruples' as a figure of thought. In his study, Harman mentions Heidegger's 'Geviert', among others, and discusses Marshall McLuhan's 'tetrad' in particular. It is noteworthy that this Tetrad also deals with technology: four laws for the effects of technology.

Bibliography

- Agamben, G. (2016). *L'usage des corps* (transl. M. Raiola). In *ibid. Homo Sacer: L'integrale*. Paris: Seuil, pp. 1053-1340.
- Chevallier, P. (2022). The Birth of Confessions of the Flesh: A Journey through the Archives. *Maynooth Philosophical Papers, 11*, pp. 55-73.
- Dorrestijn, S. (2012) *The design of our own lives: Technical mediation and subjectivation after Foucault*. Enschede: University of Twente (PhD thesis).
- Foucault, M. (2000) On the genealogy of ethics ...
- Foucault, M. (1999) About the beginning of the hermeneutics of the self, J.R. Carrette (ed.), *Religion and culture: Michel Foucault*. New York: Routledge, pp. 158-181.
- Foucault, M. (2000) What is Enlightenment? ...
- Foucault, M. (2008) Introduction à l'Anthropologie, in: I. Kant, *Anthropologie d'un point de vue pragmatique: Précédé de Michel Foucault, introduction à l'anthropologie*, F. Ewald, F. Gros and D. Defert (ed.). Paris: Vrin, pp. 11-85.
- Foucault, M. (2018) *History of sexuality I-III* ...
- Foucault, M. (2022) *Confessions of the flesh: History of sexuality IV, J.* ...
- Harman, G. (2009) The McLuhans and metaphysics. *New waves in philosophy of technology*. Basinksoke: Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 100-122.
- Heidegger, M. (1962) Die Frage nach der Technik, in: *Die Technik und die Kehre*. Stuttgart: Neske, pp. 5-36.
- O'Leary, T. (2002) *Foucault. The Art of Ethics*. London and New York: Continuum.
- Rabinow, P. (2000) Introduction, in: M. Foucault, *Ethics. Subjectivity and truth: Essential works of Foucault 1954-1984. Vol. I.*, P. Rabinow (ed.). London: Penguin, pp. XI-XLII.