

## **Critique, Ethics, and the Apparatus of Experience: a Foucauldian Framework.**

### **Author's manuscript of:**

O'Leary TE Critique, Ethics, and the Apparatus of Experience: A Foucauldian Framework, *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*, 2017, v. 12(1) p. 120-136

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### **Abstract:**

The paper explores examples of contemporary experience in order to demonstrate the moralisation of new areas of behaviour (especially in relation to environmental issues). It sketches a Foucauldian framework for understanding the historical transformation of experience, in terms of the "apparatus of experience". On that basis, it presents a novel account of critique, in which critique is seen as the potentially transformational, experiential practice of re-experiencing the contemporary apparatuses of experience. In other words, critique is "experience squared". It is this re-experiencing of our everyday experience that permits us, to a certain extent, to "get over ourselves" and thus to reflect critically on the processes of moralisation and de-moralisation in which we participate.

**Keywords:** Ethics; Experience; Critique; Foucault

## **Critique, Ethics, and the Apparatus of Experience: a Foucauldian Framework.**

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“What would critique do if it could be associated with *more*, not with *less*, with *multiplication*, not *subtraction*”.  
(Latour, 2004: 248)

“The analysis of descent permits the dissociation of the self and the proliferation of a thousand lost events on the site of its empty synthesis”.  
(Foucault, 1984a: 81 [1994a: 141, trans modified])

### **1 Transforming Moral Sensibilities**

Imagine you are sitting at a street side café. At a nearby table, three women and a young boy have just finished lunch and two of the women light up cigarettes. Let's suppose you are not a smoker and you begin to feel annoyed by the smoke that wafts over to your table. You assume the non-smoker is the mother of the boy and you wonder what she thinks of her friends' behaviour. Is she also worrying about the effect of all that smoke on the young boy? You ask yourself how long will it be before your city's smoking ban is extended to outdoor areas. Finally, the two smokers get up and leave the table and you breathe a sigh of relief, only to be dismayed when the third woman lights up. Then you notice she is pregnant.

Second, imagine that you walk into your local supermarket to pick up some things on your way home from work. You get to the check-out and the cashier asks you if you need a plastic bag. You instantly realise you have left your re-usable shopping bag in the car and you hesitate for a second before accepting the bag, for which you pay a government levy. When you get home,

your partner looks askance at the plastic bag as you feebly try to justify your forgetfulness and you resolve, yet again, to do better the next time.

When considered together, these vignettes suggest that, at least in some areas of life, the last few decades have brought about fundamental shifts in our everyday experience. This observation is unlikely to come as a surprise to anybody. Nor are these particular shifts unique in recent history. After all, similar changes have occurred in many Western societies within even shorter timeframes, for example in the area of same-sex relations and gay marriage. But what, if any, is the significance of these changes for philosophy? Are historical changes in social attitudes relevant to the work being done in fields such as ethics? I want to suggest that these changes are indeed relevant, in two quite general ways. First, they offer a rich and complex set of phenomena against which we can test and hone a rigorous account of the historicity of ethical experience. Second, the framework that emerges from this analysis opens up new ways of thinking about the tasks of critique. If we can speak of transforming ethical sensibilities, therefore, it is not just a matter of describing how our experience undergoes transformation, as it were passively, it is also a matter of addressing the contemporary forces that may actively transform it – forces that include critique.

## **2 The History of Experience**

In 1966, in *The Order of Things*, Foucault pointed out that “At any given instant, the structure proper to individual experience finds a certain number of possible choices (and of excluded possibilities) in the systems of the society; inversely, at each of their points of choice the social structures encounter a certain number of possible individuals (and others who are not)” (2002, 415). In other words, at each particular place and time there is a certain range of subjective experience that is made more or less likely by the social structures of that time. And, as the social structures change, so too does the range of possible human experience. What this gives rise to, as Ian Hacking has pointed out, is the possibility of studying the historical transformations that open up and

close off potential human experiences (2002, 23). But what does it mean to say that the range of possible human experience changes historically? Isn't that just a trivial fact? To address this concern, let's begin by distinguishing three senses in which human experience could be said to have a history.

First, as an individual, there is the sequence of experiences that I have had – eating soft-serve ice cream as a child, learning to drive, getting a job, seeing Borobudur for the first time, and so on. And, collectively, there is the sum of all human experience. We could say that this form of historicity arises from the, at least theoretical, possibility that one could record the entirety of one's own experiences. Whether such a task is really possible, either for an individual or the species, is a question that we can leave to one side here. But, let's call this the chronicler's history of experience.

Second, my experience has a history in so far as soft-serve ice cream no longer pleases me as much today as it did when I was a child. That childhood experience is now lost to me. And, if I ever see Borobudur again that experience will necessarily be different from – and coloured by – my first experience. Similarly, the thrill of 'high-speed' nineteenth century train travel is now lost to all of us. If we travel on a steam train today, it is likely to be at an 'olde worlde' tourist attraction. Even the early-adopters' pleasure at swiping the touch screen of the first iPad in 2010 is something that has become dulled for users today. The historicity of experience, in this sense, arises from the cumulative and dynamic nature of experience – both for individuals and societies. Let's call this the history of experience as *bildung*.

My suggestion, which I will elaborate here, is that it also makes sense to talk about the history of experience in a third sense. This is history in a more profound sense – a historicity that arises from fundamental changes in the way we relate to ourselves, to others, and to the world. It corresponds to changes in what Foucault might have been willing to call the "historical *a priori*" of experience. Let's call this the history of the apparatus of experience, although Foucault in fact never used this term.

So, addressing the concern expressed above, we can say that while in one sense it is trivially true that experience has a history, it is also true that experience has a history in other, more significant, senses. It is true that the chronicler's history of experience may be of little philosophical importance. The fact that, for example, at one time and place humans were introduced to the abundant uses of plastic, while at another time and place they carefully curtailed its use, doesn't seem in itself to be all that interesting. The second sense in which experience can be said to have a history is, however, much more significant. Recognising the history of experience as *bildung*, the kind of history that Gadamer for example investigated (2003), is essential for understanding transformations in the way individuals (and groups) experience the world. The overlaying of experience in complex webs of mutual interference and influence is a basic feature of our being in the world. One of its most important implications is, as Gadamer says, that "Strictly speaking, we cannot have the same experience twice" (2003, 353). Further than this, however, the third sense in which experience can be said to have a history is of even more far-reaching significance. Put crudely, this is the idea that the field of possible experiences is not historically stable. There was a time in the past (and there will be a time in the future) when choosing a bag could not (and will not) be lived as a moral experience. And this is not merely because a historical succession of everyday objects appear in and disappear from the social world, nor is it because of an accumulated familiarity, or loss of familiarity, with these objects. Rather, my suggestion is that changes occur in the underlying apparatus of experience that render some experiences more likely, almost inevitable, while others are consigned to the limits of possibility. To begin to give an account of this apparatus, it will help to think of it as analogous to what Foucault variously calls an *episteme*, an historical *a priori*, and an apparatus.

A quick characterisation of Foucault's work from the 1960s would say that it began, in *History of Madness* (Foucault, 2006), with a form of analysis that combined, in a more or less confused way, all three of the later themes that were to occupy his work: knowledge, power, and self (O'Leary, 2010). In the course of the 1960s, the first of these themes was teased out and developed in a series of books that culminated in *Archaeology of Knowledge* (Foucault,

1972). At the centre of this work was the idea that systems of knowledge are historically conditioned in ways that can be archeologically explored. To describe these systems, with their inherent limitations and possibilities, is to describe an *episteme*, or the historically contingent form of knowledge in a particular time and place. The *episteme* is the set of rules that govern what will be “in the true” in a given period; and the *episteme* is capable of undergoing quite radical and abrupt shifts, such as that which occurred at the beginning of the modern era. By the time he wrote *Archaeology of Knowledge* in 1969, Foucault had begun to speak of these conditions of knowledge as constituting an historical, as opposed to a formal, *a priori*. The historical *a priori* is the group of rules that characterise a particular discursive practice, that are purely contingent and subject to historical modification. Foucault doesn't reject the idea of a formal *a priori*, however, he merely holds that these two exist on different levels, in “two different dimensions” (1972, 128).

Subsequently, in 1977, at a time when Foucault's work had already moved on to focus on power, he redefines the *episteme* in this way:

I would define the *episteme* retrospectively as the strategic apparatus which permits of separating out from among all the statements which are possible those that will be acceptable within, I won't say a scientific theory, but a field of scientificity, and which it is possible to say are true or false. (1980, 197)

There is no doubt that this retrospective definition modifies the concept as it had appeared in the 1960s. But, if we are willing to allow Foucault a little bit of flexibility, or indeed his own *bildung*, then I think we can say that this re-definition captures something that was perhaps only latent in the concept as it first appeared. In any case, it is a redefinition that opens up some new possibilities.

The *episteme*, then, can be re-defined as a strategic apparatus for separating scientific from non-scientific statements. And what is an “apparatus”? Well, at this period of Foucault's work (mid-1970s), the term

apparatus (*dispositif*) is used to indicate a whole ensemble of elements that somehow, in more or less coordinated fashion, bring about certain discursive and socio-political effects. The elements that comprise the apparatus are a mixed bag of discourses, laws, architectural forms and philosophical theories; and the apparatus itself is a “system of relations” that is established between these elements (1997, 194). Hence, we could speak of an eighteenth century “apparatus of discipline” that comprised instruction manuals, medical knowledge, military institutions, parade grounds, weaponry, and so on.

My suggestion here is that this group of concepts – the *episteme*, the historical *a priori*, and the apparatus – can help us begin to think about the third sense in which I said experience has a history. What if it were possible to identify the historically contingent elements that define and structure the field of possible experience? If the *episteme* can be called the epistemological unconscious, the “positive unconscious of knowledge” (2002, xi), then can we also investigate the experiential unconscious? And, if Foucault, along with Bachelard, allows us to think about “epistemological ruptures”, can we also think about experiential ruptures? In what follows, I will suggest that it does make sense to speak in these terms, and that in turn will allow us to develop an account of what we can call deliberately induced experiential ruptures – that is, critically induced shifts in our ethical experience.

### **3 The Apparatus of Experience**

What are the components of the apparatus of experience? As we have seen, an apparatus can consist of a diverse and bewildering range of discursive and non-discursive elements. In thinking about the apparatus of experience, however, we can follow Foucault in grouping this multiplicity along three axes. These three groups are i) forms of knowledge, ii) forms of normativity, and iii) forms of relation to the self (2008, 5; 2011, 3). It is the “articulation” of these three elements that constitute what Foucault calls “*foyers d’expérience*” (2008,

5), noting that he himself had focused his work on several key *foyers*, such as madness, criminality, and sexuality. But, what is a *foyer d'expérience*? This phrase is translated by Graham Burchell as “focal point of experience” (2011, 3), reading *foyer* in the sense of the technical term from optics ‘focal point’, rather than in the more everyday sense of *foyer* as ‘source’ or ‘meeting place’. One advantage of this rendering is that it conveys the idea that our modern experience comes most sharply into focus in domains such as sexuality, madness, and so on. However, we should be careful not to miss what I take to be the important implication that experience arises out of the interplay between the three elements. It is not that experience is a pre-existing phenomenon or capacity that gets focused on something like madness or sexuality. Rather, our experience of “madness” or “sexuality” is itself first made possible by the articulation of these elements; in other words, it is made possible by this apparatus. This sense is captured in an alternative phrasing that Foucault uses on several occasions, when he speaks of these axes as constituting the “matrix of experience” (1997a, 204). It is the interplay between these elements that makes any experience possible.

Now, since the components that make up each of the three axes are in a state of continuous historical transformation, it follows that the modes of experience that they make possible must also be in flux. And this occurs, not only at the level of what we can call historical time, but also at the micro-level of the life-span of an individual. While most, if not all, of these historical transformations occur, as it were, independently of conscious intentionality, and while they are usually, if not always, beyond the awareness of the individual, we will see that they can become susceptible to deliberate critical intervention.

Let’s see how this basic model works in relation to the first vignette I described above. Along the first axis (knowledge) the most obvious feature of this scenario is that whatever my response to this situation, whether I am a smoker or a non-smoker, much of my response will be coloured by commonly held knowledge about the negative effects of cigarette smoke. And this knowledge has a history, in the sense of both history of science and political history. This unremarkable, everyday experience is, therefore, quite precisely



dateable; it could not have happened in 1960 and may no longer be possible in 2060. Along the second axis (normativity), the key determining element is the increasing regulation of smoking in public places, which is of course closely connected to the knowledge axis via the science of public health. The framework for this experience is, therefore, put in place by this form of regulation; but it is also coloured by my own views about the kinds of norms that should govern social interaction. Am I myself a smoker who believes smokers have a right to smoke in public, or do I believe that even apart from health concerns, this is a public nuisance that should be controlled? In any case, it is clear that whatever the particular nuances of my experience in this situation, elements of power, law, and regulation are key determining factors. And all of these factors are clearly historically variable. Along the third axis (forms of relation to the self, or ethics), my experience is shaped through the lens of both my modes of relation to self and my moral judgements about others. It is possible, for example, that I myself had overcome my own smoking habit in the past and now see the smokers' behaviour as, in the broadest sense, a moral failing, perhaps of the *akratic* type. And, there is no doubt that the sight of a pregnant woman smoking will be experienced as both shocking and, to some extent, morally outrageous by many people today.

What the Foucauldian framework gives us, then, is a way of identifying the web of historically contingent factors that give shape to our everyday experience. There is, however, a question here about the extent to which these historically specific factors are determining. Is our experience determined 'all the way down' by such factors? Or, are there certain biological or natural limits to its historicity? What of the sheer olfactory experience of the cigarette smoke, for example? Surely that has no historical component. While I can't do this topic justice here, I would suggest that it is more difficult than one might imagine to identify a pure, ahistorical experience (cf. Agamben 1993). For *most* intents and purposes, my own experience of the smell of cigarette smoke is, at the very least, subject to history in the *bildung* sense. My mother smoked when I was a child, I smoked as an adult, I no longer smoke now; so today, the smell of cigarette smoke is both irritating and, at times, pleasantly nostalgic. So, while I am capable of making what one might call a pure or neutral distinction between,

say, the smell of cigarette smoke and cigar smoke, it is also true that for *most* intents and purposes, it is the more nuanced and historically fluid experience that really matters to me.

Further than this *bildung* sense of history, however, there is the really difficult question of whether the olfactory experience is also subject to history in the sense of the historical *a priori*. Is there something about the current anti-smoking climate that primes us to experience cigarette smoke as more unpleasant than would otherwise be the case? Does the contemporary apparatus of experience make it more likely that I will experience the smell as unpleasant? One way to think about this interplay between history and the body would be to go back to the analogy I drew on earlier, between the idea of the history of experience and Foucault's account of an historical *a priori*. I already noted that Foucault's investigation of an historical *a priori* in no way implies that he rejects the notion of a formal *a priori*. Rather, he says that these belong to different dimensions – albeit, dimensions that do intersect. Foucault suggests that the empirically contingent historical *a prioris* allow us to account for the particular “points of contact, places of insertion, irruption, or emergence” of the formal *a prioris* (1972, 128).

Extending the analogy, it might be possible to argue that the entire biological experiential infrastructure is like the formal *a priori*, while the historical *a priori* is the socially mediated apparatus of any historically contingent actual experience. So, at any given time, a particular historically contingent apparatus will facilitate, or awaken, certain possibilities in the sensorium, while others will remain dormant. This would explain why, for example, the smell of cigarette smoke can be pleasurable, irritating, nostalgic, seductive, or addictive for different people at different times. While much of this variation occurs at the level of individual *bildung* (that is, the life experience of the individual), the challenge would be to identify the shared elements, the components of the apparatus, that determine these possibilities in historically contingent ways.

That is not my task here, but at least this sketch of an approach to the question shows how the concept of the apparatus of experience may point a

way towards answering it. Using the three axes of the apparatus of experience as an analytic grid, we can give an account of the historically determined elements of the most commonplace experiences. Even though the human sensorium, understood as a biological system, may be something of a limit-case for this account, the account does effectively open up much of our experience to a historical analysis. And this is particularly true for experiences which could be called *ethical* experiences, to which I will turn now.

#### **4 The History of Ethical Experience**

How do we isolate an experience that is, in some sense, ethical from any other sort of experience? One way to do so would be to identify those experiences in which the third element of the matrix of experience — that is, the modes of subjectivity or the "pragmatics of self" (2011, 5) — are of prime significance. Let's look more closely at the second vignette I described and see how Foucault's framework can help us to pick out these ethical factors. Even at a first glance, it is clear how this experience is structured along the first and second axes. The whole scenario could not take place without a certain widely accepted (and denied) body of knowledge about climate change. As in the case of the smoking vignette, this knowledge has a history in both a history of science and a political sense. And, even when the basic facts about climate change have been accepted there can still be a debate about how effective are measures such as the targeting of plastic bags. Along the second axis, once again the scenario is only made possible by a regulatory regime that was introduced by government authorities with the cooperation of shops and the manufacturers of re-usable bags. As in the smoking vignette, if there were no such regulatory infrastructure, there would be no such experience to report.

Along the third axis, however, things are quite different in the case of the plastic bag. Here, it is more than likely that you will experience this event as activating ethical self-understandings, principles, and ideals. In my imagined version, you acknowledge the eco-friendly principles involved and you want to enact them in your own activities, but you choose what might be seen as the

lazy option and then feel remorse when forced to acknowledge this to a significant other. This is not a matter of applying your pre-existing, more or less stable moral principles to a new phenomenon. The experience, as described, actually requires a shift in your understanding of yourself as a moral agent. It requires you to see yourself as, to some extent, responsible for the fate of the planet, and it requires you to enact this understanding when making choices that were not previously problematised for you. In this way, the simple fact of choosing a shopping bag becomes an ethical dilemma.

In the Preface to *The Order of Things*, Foucault talks about his laughter when he read Borges' account of a Chinese encyclopedia in which animals are categorized in incongruous and illogical ways. Foucault explains the significance of his laughter in this way:

In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*. (2002, xvi)

How did it come about that the choice of a shopping bag could have *that* significance for so many people today? As I have suggested, the best way we can account for this strange novelty is by investigating the three-fold web of historically changing elements that give shape to the experience. In the most general terms, what we see happening here is the moralisation of a range of behaviour that was previously outside the moral domain. This process of moralisation is, of course, closely bound up with changes that occur along the knowledge and normativity axes. But, it is the changing forms of the "pragmatics of self", along the third axis, that give this experience its novel character as an *ethical* experience. And, the advantage of the analysis offered here is that it allows us to identify the relatively fluid, historically variable elements that make an experience like *that* possible.

Hence, I would suggest that this experience of buying the plastic bag is identifiable as ethical – not because it involves the practical application of

previously accepted moral principles – but because it activates a whole range of concerns about self-formation. These concerns are, as we have seen, activated within a broader framework that includes forms of knowledge about climate change, and also an emerging set of norms of behaviour that cajole us into “environmentally responsible” actions. But, it is the shifts at the level of the pragmatics of self that really make the experience possible as ethical. The act of buying the bag is not intrinsically moral in nature, therefore, it is simply that the articulation of the three elements, today, makes it more likely that the experience will crystallise, or come into focus, as having a strong moral component. It will, let us say, be more or less strongly infused with morality.

But, of course, the boundaries between ethical and other experiences are neither clear-cut nor impermeable. For example, the encounter with the smokers at the cafe also carried an ethical component and in fact could be re-described in such a way as to highlight those aspects. Nevertheless, I think it is useful to make a distinction and to treat a certain set of experiences as having important shared features of this kind, with the proviso that it is a somewhat artificial maneuver and that in any case there is no historically stable set of ethical experiences. Borrowing a phrase coined by Georges Canguilhem (1983, 46), we can say that what is “in the true” today wasn’t “in the true” yesterday, and probably will not be “in the true” tomorrow. All sorts of behaviours have undergone the process of moralisation and de-moralisation: behaviours ranging from marital infidelity and same sex relations, to the practice of selling human beings, eating factory-farmed meat, and using plastic bags. But, it is not only the content that changes; as we have seen, the form of moralisation also changes. Subject to those limitations, then, let’s say that the domain of ethical experience is the domain in which concerns and practices relating to self-self and self-other relations are activated in a way that is often filtered through concepts such as right and wrong, moral responsibility, and so on. The fact that there is a history of ethical experience in this sense implies that there is also a *future* of ethical experience. This is where the concept of critique becomes important.

## 5 The Critique of Ethical Experience

What would it mean to engage in a critique of ethical experience, where ethical experience is understood according to this model? Foucault, of course, wrote some important texts on the nature of critique – most notably the 1978 lecture “What is Critique?” (1997b) and the 1984 lecture “What is Enlightenment?” (1984b). However, rather than working through those sources here, I want to take a more simple route. Let’s start with a very straightforward account of critique, one that I extract from a comment Foucault made about his own work in a rather obscure interview from 1980:

I try to analyze a real situation in its various complexities, with the goal of allowing refusal, and curiosity, and innovation. (1988, 13)

Paraphrasing and extrapolating, we can say that critique is the *production* of a certain intellectual output that focuses on an aspect of one’s *present reality*; and this output *allows others* to engage in practices of *refusal*, *curiosity*, and *innovation*. Refusal, that is, of an aspect of one’s present reality; curiosity about how it came to be and how it is maintained; and innovation in our attempts to both think and live otherwise.

The emphasis in this succinct definition is a little different from what we see in the other sources. In the 1978 lecture, Foucault had described critique as something like a social movement that sprang up in opposition to the early modern development of new arts of government – in both the ecclesiastical and the political domains. In opposition to those new forms of governmentality, critique was “the art of not being governed quite so much” (1997b, 45). On this account, therefore, critique is the art of refusal that emerges in opposition to the increasing governmentalisation of Early Modern European society. In the 1984 lecture, he associates the critical attitude with, once again, a characteristically modern approach to the limits of one’s current forms of life, but this time with a different set of cultural references. Critique – which has a complicated relation to both Enlightenment and the Baudelairian dandy – is an attitude that strives both to understand the limits that are imposed on us and to go beyond those

limits through practical experimentation (1984b, 50). I choose to prioritize the account given in the 1980 interview, however, because it compresses all of these ideas in a way that pithily brings out the relation between critique as transformative practice and critique as a mode of intellectual production.

As an intellectual activity, critique has a strong, indeed essential, historical component. However, the point of these historical investigations is not, Foucault remarks, to “satisfy professional historians”, but to use a particular historical content in order to:

have for myself, and to invite others to share with me...an experience of what we are, not only our past but also our present, an experience of our modernity from which we might emerge transformed. (2000, 242; translation modified, see 1994b, 44)

The core idea here is that a certain historically grounded intellectual production can make a potentially transformative experience available to both researcher and reader. This effect is by no means automatic or guaranteed, however, because in order for it to actually occur, whether for researcher or reader, some kind of work on the self, some kind of risking of the self, will have to take place. Here is another comment Foucault makes about his own work that may help us to understand this requirement:

The experience through which we manage to grasp the intelligibility of certain mechanisms (for example imprisonment, punishment, etc.) and the way in which we manage to detach ourselves from them [*nous en détacher*] by perceiving them otherwise, should be one and the same thing. This is really the heart of what I am doing. (2000, 244; translation modified, see 1994b, 46)

Now, paraphrasing this, we could say that the experience through which we come to *understand* certain apparatuses of experience is the same experience through which we come to *transform* those experiences by detaching ourselves from them. In other words, the process of re-experiencing our modes of

experience is the process through which we modify them, by in some way modifying ourselves. On this basis, we can say that critique makes available a de-automatising re-experiencing of our unthought experiences. I will call this experience squared, in the sense that it involves an experience of experience that multiplies the possibilities of experience through self-reflection. This is a fundamental element of critique — or, at least, a fundamental element of the critique of experience in the domain of ethics.

In order to avert a possible misunderstanding here, I think it is important to emphasise that this work of transforming experience is not simply a matter of changing what is in our minds; it is not, for example, a matter of changing how we feel about things. Even if the ultimate outcome *is* that people do change what is ‘in their heads’, the point is that this can only be effectively brought about by changes at a different level. In thinking about transformations in experience, this would mean changes in relevant aspects of each of the three components of the matrix of experience.

But, what is so special about *ethical* experiences? To be precise, why would they be a more intractable object of critique than any other domain of experience? Well, the problem is that to detach oneself from *them* requires, to a much greater degree, that one detach oneself from *oneself*. I have already suggested that ethical experiences are those in which our modes of relation to self are most implicated and activated. My decision to accept the plastic bag may be difficult, for me, because it conflicts with my understanding of myself as an enlightened, ecologically responsible member of an already fragile global eco-system. And this mode of relating to myself may be one that I have only arrived at after a prolonged process of adjustment. If, in contrast, I gladly choose the plastic bag, I may be doing so out of my own ethical certainty that climate change is a myth, that governments shouldn’t impose levies, and that individuals are best left to their own independent, self-maximising pursuits. In either case, the point is that gaining a critical distance vis-à-vis our ethical experiences is difficult precisely because it requires us to detach ourselves – or at least open ourselves to the possibility of detaching – from what may be our



most intimate and dearly held conceptions and practices of self. I want to turn now to a tentative account of what this critical work on the self might involve.

## 6 Get Over Yourself

We have already seen one occasion on which Foucault gives a central role to curiosity in the work of critique. In another context, he remarks that his own motivation for undertaking the two-volume history of ancient Greek and Roman sexuality and ethics was, once again, curiosity – to be precise, the kind of curiosity “which enables one to get free of oneself [*se déprendre de soi-même*]” (1985, 8). But, how could curiosity do such a thing, and what does it mean to *se déprendre de soi-même*? In a way that is characteristic of his late work, this phrase indicates Foucault’s willingness to draw a strong connection between his own, let’s call it Nietzschean, critique and a long philosophical and even religious tradition of “spirituality”. In one of his late interviews, Foucault gives this tentative definition of spirituality:

By spirituality, I understand...that which precisely refers to a subject acceding to a certain mode of being and to the transformations which the subject must make of himself in order to accede to this mode of being. (2000, 294)

This understanding is close to that of Pierre Hadot (1981; 1995), who interprets ancient Greek and Roman philosophy as an elaboration of a series of “spiritual exercises” whose aim is to transform the self. Hence, we could say that the prisoners in Plato’s cave, for example, are faced with the task not so much of breaking their chains as breaking free of themselves. And they do this through a spiritual exercise that Hadot calls a “conversion” (1981, 175) and Plato calls a “turning around of the mind itself” (1982, 518d). In essence, then, the mission Socrates sets for himself is to goad and guide as many fellow Athenians as possible towards such a conversion.

Expanding from this core meaning, Foucault comes to see the idea of getting free of oneself, conceived as a spiritual exercise, as existing on a line that connects Socrates, the Stoics, the early Christian ascetics, the leaders of the Reformation, nineteenth century revolutionaries, and even (briefly) the Iranian revolution of 1979. In making this conception central to his idea of critique, he also situates contemporary critique as emerging out of a long and complicated history – one that doesn't offer a model but may offer resources to us in the present. One of those resources, I would suggest, is this idea of getting free of oneself. So, once again, what does it mean to *se dépendre de soi-même*?

First, it must be clear to any reader with even the most limited French that “getting free” couldn't exactly be a literal translation of *se dépendre de*. But, the problem is that there is no single straightforward way to translate that verb into English — at least, if one wants to avoid a construction such as “to self-untake oneself from oneself”. Translators of Foucault have chosen a range of ways to get around this: Hurley has “to get free of oneself” (Foucault, 1985, 8); Rabinow suggests “to disassemble the self” (Foucault, 1997a, xxxviii); Flynn suggests “think against oneself” (Flynn, 2005, 620). These are all perfectly fine translations, but really the possibilities are countless and might include: to break away from oneself; to be released from oneself; to get release from oneself; to shed one's skin; to be reborn; to see oneself anew; to see oneself in a new light; to divest oneself of oneself. Many of these phrases convey some of the sense of spirituality that Foucault wishes to tap into. And, it is not by chance that many of them are common ways to characterise experiences of profound (religious) conversion. The final example in this list is a rather striking phrase that occurs in an observer's account of a Catholic martyr's preparation for death. Oliver Plunkett, who was the Archbishop of Armagh at the time, was hanged, drawn and quartered in London in 1681; in his final days of imprisonment he is said to have “continually studied how to divest himself of himself, and become more and more an entire and perfect holocaust” (cited in Kilfeather, 2002, 229).

While these religious and spiritual resonances are clearly present, and while Foucault was not necessarily averse to playing with this range of

meanings, it is also possible to translate the phrase in ways that are more, for want of a better expression, secular. These might include: to extricate the self from itself; to get distance from oneself; to stop believing in oneself; to get out of your own clutches; to dissociate from oneself; to reject oneself; to unwind one's position (yoga or finance?); to break the habits of the self. For the purposes of this paper, however, I would like to suggest a different, more vernacular possibility, as a way of defusing some of the spiritual aura around this concept. Thus, I will say that Foucault valued the kind of curiosity "which allows you to get over yourself". Here, getting over yourself draws on the everyday sense of: letting go of my sense of self-importance; loosening the bonds that tie me to my so dearly-held beliefs; discarding the idea that my values, worldview, and perspective are of major significance simply because they are mine. What I will add to this everyday sense of the term is the idea that getting over yourself is a very difficult thing to do; it requires, as everybody in this philosophico-spiritual tradition will attest, a "patient labour" on the self (Foucault, 1984, 50). But what it brings to light are those points at which change is possible, what Foucault calls "transformable singularities" rather than "impassable boundaries" (1997a, 201). Putting this together with what has gone before, we can say that critique is an intellectual-experimental practice that makes it possible to re-experience our unthought modes of experience, in such a way that helps or cajoles us to 'get over ourselves', thus opening up the possibility of transformation.

Let's revisit the plastic bag vignette one last time. If we were interested in undertaking a critique of our contemporary (ethical) experience in relation to the environment, there are several things we would need to do. First, investigate the forms of production, distribution, and contestation of knowledge relating to climate change. Second, explore the modes of regulation and coercion, in other words the governmentality, of behaviour in environmentally relevant domains. Third, give an account of the newly emerging pragmatics of self that inform ethical self-understandings and practices for a growing number of individuals. Such an investigation would count as critique insofar as it would both encourage and require a questioning, a distancing, and potentially a letting-go, of habitual (or even brand new) ethical conceptions and practices. The role of intellectual production in this whole process would be to facilitate a re-

experiencing of those familiar modes of experience, for both researcher and reader; that is, a kind of experience squared.

## **7 Conclusion**

My aim here has been to set up a framework for the analysis of the historical dimensions of experience. This framework allows us to give an account of the ways in which individual, everyday experience is made possible by broader social and historical forces. In other words, it allows us to gauge the extent to which our experiences as individuals are not as private and unique as we might imagine. This historical analysis of experience also opens up a novel way of understanding the force of critique. On this account, critique is a kind of intellectual labour that makes available (to both researcher and reader) a destabilising re-experiencing of the historical dimensions of our everyday experience. Critique is an experiential practice; that is, experience squared. In the field of ethics, more than in any other field, this demands a loosening of the bonds that tie us to our habitual modes of thought and action. This loosening is an essential step if we are to “get over ourselves”, in the sense of opening ourselves up to new modes of the pragmatics of self.

While the account given here sets up the framework for a critique of ethical experience, with particular reference to contemporary changes in moral sensibility in relation to the environment, it doesn't actually carry out such a critique. But, it still may not be premature to ask what might emerge from such a critique in this domain. One way to begin to answer that question would be to point out that the theme of responsibility is central to this whole field of our contemporary moral experience. Along all three axes of experience, the problem of responsibility emerges. First, who is responsible for the climate change that is already observable in our planet? Is it really anthropogenic, and if so, which countries and which human behaviours are now the biggest contributors? Second, who is responsible for bringing about the kinds of changes that are necessary to slow down the rate of climate change? Private corporations, international bodies, national governments, only the developed

nations or the emerging economies also? Third, to what extent is the individual consumer responsible for the global impacts of their everyday behaviour? And, most importantly, what technologies of 'responsibilisation' are contributing to a changing pragmatics of the self in this domain? In all three domains, then, discourses and practices of responsibility are mobilised in ways that call for a critical problematisation. In the domain of ethics, however, this mobilisation can be expected to be more intimately bound up with ingrained habits of self-relation. As a result, the task here would be to open up this newly emerging pragmatics of self for critical exploration. We cannot say, in advance, what would arise from such a critique, but on the basis of the argument presented here we can be sure that it would require, in some way and to some extent, that we all get over ourselves.

## **Acknowledgments:**

This research received funding from a General Research Fund grant from the Research Grants Council of Hong Kong.

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