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Ethics and the ontology of freedom: problematization and responsiveness in Foucault and Deleuze

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ABSTRACT: Both Foucault and Deleuze define ethics as a form of creative activity. Yet, given certain ontological features indicated by both thinkers, ethics must be more than just creative and critical activity. Forgoing a transcendent ground for ethics, the ontological condition of ethics – what Foucault calls *liberté* and Deleuze calls the plane of immanence – is an opening for change that makes possible normalizing modes of existence as well transformative ones. In this context, ethics must be a practice that comprehends the dangers of such open-ended creation. The concept of problematization, emphasized by Foucault and Deleuze, leads to an enhanced understanding of their conception of ethics. On this understanding, ethics is a practice of problematization requiring a determination and assessment of the most pressing problems to which one must respond rather than attempt to solve once and for all. Ethics is necessarily a *responsive* engagement with the problems of one's present.

Keywords: Foucault, Deleuze, ethics, problematization, responsiveness, freedom, critique

In his Preface to Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, Michel Foucault lauds the work as "the first book of ethics to be written in France in quite a long time."¹ *Anti-Oedipus*, Foucault writes, is a book of ethics because it is an "Introduction to the Non-Fascist Life[.]" a guide to the "art of living counter to all forms of fascism."² In conceptualizing Deleuze and Guattari's work in this way, Foucault anticipates his own interest in ethics, joining his understanding of ethics as a matter of the practices through which one relates to and constitutes oneself to Deleuze and Guattari's thought. An "essential principle" of this guide proposes that "[i]t is the connection of desire to reality ... that possess revolutionary force."³ This tenet unites Foucault and Deleuze's understanding of the sense of ethics, finding it both in critique of and resistance to the limitations of the present, and in the vital tie between that present reality and the forces that propel us beyond it. In this essay, I seek to develop this sense of ethics as an activity of

¹ Michel Foucault, Preface to *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) xiii.

² *Ibid*, xiii.

³ *Ibid*, xiv.

thinking and living that entails responsiveness to reality as an integral part of “living counter to all forms of fascism.”

The ethical importance of Foucault’s work is typically found in his later writings on the self and the practices that are involved in creating and caring for the self. On synthetic accounts, Foucault’s ethics is integrated with his critical genealogical projects, and ethico-aesthetic practices of self-creation are theorized as necessarily critical ones.⁴ By calling attention to a less established, but equally important theme, I maintain that Foucault’s ethics must also be understood through the lens of problems and the activity of problematization, as a particular dimension of critique.⁵ I develop this theme by reading Foucault’s work in conjunction with that of Gilles Deleuze; from an ethical and political perspective, both philosophers are read as advocating creativity and novelty, if nothing else, and both articulate clear theories of problems and problematization that complement one another in valuable ways. As I suggest, their emphasis on problematization is significant not only because it renders notions of critique and resistance more precise, but also because it reveals the intimate link between ontology and ethics. Broadly speaking, problematization is the work of elaborating and forming problems, delineating both the contours of a problem and the conditions that give rise to it as a problem. Problematization is an act of thought that is essentially ethical in its scope because, as the very shaping of problems, it is an activity that dictates how we might understand them and thus begin to respond to them.

Thus, although Foucaultian and Deleuzian ethics is accurately defined by creativity and critique, their ethics involve more than these two features. The main aim of this essay is to develop the sense of their ethics beyond these two specifications. By emphasizing the ontological elements of their work, we can see that the unique significance of their ethics lies in

⁴ Thomas Flynn’s “Truth and Subjectivation in the Later Foucault,” *Journal of Philosophy*, volume 82, no. 10 (1985): 531-540, provides a clear overview of the place of ethics in Foucault’s work – i.e., of the connection between ethics and genealogy via the relationships between power, knowledge, and subjectivity – and delineates the aesthetic dimensions of the ethics of care of the self (1985). Bernauer and Mahon’s “Michel Foucault’s Ethical Imagination,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, ed. Gary Gutting, 149-175 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), for a characterization of Foucault’s ethic as a “political ethic” and thus as a necessarily critical one. A more extensive account can be found in James W. Bernauer, *Michel Foucault’s Force of Flight: Toward an Ethics for Thought* (London: Humanities Press, 1990). Edward McGushin’s *Foucault’s Askesis: An Introduction to the Philosophical Life* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern, 2007) is a careful study of the significance of the care of the self for what it means to live philosophically. Timothy O’Leary, *Foucault and the Art of Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2002) emphasizes the necessity of rejecting the socially dominant forms of individuality that we have been given in order to cultivate a relationship to self in which we continually transform the self. Feminist perspectives on Foucaultian ethics are collected in Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintges, ed., *Feminism and the Final Foucault* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

⁵ Increasing attention is being paid to the concept of problematization. See the following: Zach VanderVeen, “Bearing the lightning of possible storms: Foucault’s Experimental Social Criticism,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 43 (2010): 467-484, argues that Foucault’s form of social criticism is “experimental” and focused on “re-problematization”; C. Colwell, “Deleuze and Foucault: Series, Event, Genealogy,” *Theory and Event*, volume 1, no. 2 (1997) briefly summarizes the way the genealogical project involves problematization, arguing that such problematization comprises a counter-actualization of the event; most recently, Colin Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013) treats the theme of problematization extensively.

how it is rooted in a particular conception of ontological mobility and how this shifting ontological ground demands a particular kind of ethics. Ontological mobility – what Foucault calls *liberté* and Deleuze calls the plane of immanence – entails the stipulation that we not only lack any kind ontological foundation for normative claims, but further that ontological mobility poses a continual danger to ethical engagement. By understanding critical activity in terms of problematization and its correlate, responsiveness, we gain a clearer picture of this kind of ethics. Specifically, I contend that there are two fundamental types of conditions to which we must respond: the historically and socially contingent conditions of our present milieu, and the basic mutability of power relations that constitutes freedom. Thus, one of the most persistent problems that calls for response is the simple fact of our own freedom and the corresponding fact that, in Foucault's words, "everything is dangerous." If ethics takes the form of critical self-creation, then the practices of self-creation in which we engage must be ones that expose the problem itself and negotiate its terrain. That is, they must move beyond creativity or novelty to deal with the possibility of their own co-optation. Problematization is the mode of critique that makes it possible to reckon with this danger for the following reasons: 1) problematization recognizes the ontological mobility that leads to it; 2) it involves delineating the very contours of a problem rather than accepting ready-made dilemmas; and thus 3) it involves response to the specificity of the conditions that make the problem what it is. Problematization is the form of reflection that makes freedom ethical rather than just a state of insistent openness to change.

My aim in reading the two thinkers together on this topic is twofold: First, by explicating the notion of problematization, I elaborate their ethical thought beyond the formal requirements of style (the demand that one be creative) and direction (the demand that creation produce novelty and be futurally oriented). Calling attention to problematization reveals both a concept and an ethos of responsiveness inherent in their work, and so accentuates a specific type of normative content that it is sometimes alleged to lack.⁶ The second aim of synthesizing

⁶ See Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-313, for the criticism that, in "Intellectuals and Power" in particular, Deleuze and Foucault "ignore the question of ideology and their own implication in intellectual and economic history" (272). Classic criticisms of Foucault include Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987); Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); Charles Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," *Political Theory*, volume 12, no. 2 (1985): 152-183. Responses to the charges regarding normativity are many, including Amy Allen, *The Politics of Ourselves: Power, Autonomy, and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Niko Kolodny, "The Ethics of Cryptonormativism: A Defense of Foucault's Evasions," *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, volume 22, no. 5 (1996): 63-84; Matthew King "Clarifying the Foucault-Habermas Debate: Morality, ethics, and 'normative foundations,'" *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, volume 35, no. 3 (2009): 287-314; and Dianna Taylor, "Normativity and Normalization," *Foucault Studies* 7 (2009): 45-63. Whereas criticism of Foucault has mainly come from political theorists, criticism of Deleuze on normative grounds has primarily come from feminist theorists: Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 140-141; Alice Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986); Rosi Braidotti, "Becoming Woman: or Sexual Difference Revisited," *Theory, Culture, & Society*, volume 20, no.

Deleuze and Foucault under the rubric of the problem is to show how, when taken jointly, slightly differing focal points in the work of each enable a defense of Deleuzo-Foucaultian ethics against some central nodes of criticism; this line of reasoning is developed in the third section. The first section sketches what it means for each thinker to define ethics in terms of creative practices and reveals how these practices depend upon certain basic ontological features, freedom or *liberté* for Foucault and the plane of immanence for Deleuze. The second section turns to the stipulation that ethical engagement be critical, explicating both how problematization is key to critical ethical practices, especially in light of the basic ontological mobility described in the previous section, and how an ethos of responsiveness is entailed by problematization.

I. Ethical Activity as Creative Activity

Much can be said to orient an analysis of the two thinkers and contrast their “post-structuralist” ethics with traditional normative ethics. Suffice it to say, for both Deleuze and Foucault, ethics differs significantly from a morality grounded upon a transcendent basis, for instance, upon reason and human dignity. First, both advocate an ethics of practice and experimentation in contrast to a morality of fixed rules and principles, which are derived from and depend upon that transcendent ground.⁷ Thus, second, they follow a Nietzschean trajectory in which ethical standards are immanent ones, in which ethical valuation is practiced and lived, a product of life itself rather than a contrivance with which to judge it. Third, ethics must thus be understood as *ethos*, a style or way of living rather than merely a set of necessary rules that guide our existence.⁸ It must be, moreover, an *ethos* that enables new ways of thinking, feeling, and existing. Ethics is a type of creative activity rather than adherence to and application of

3 (2003): 43-64; Pelagia Goulimari, “A Minoritarian Feminism?” *Hypatia*, volume 14, no. 2 (1999): 97-120; Dorothea Olkowski, *Gilles Deleuze and the Ruin of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); and Erinn Gilson, “Responsive Becoming: Ethics between Deleuze and Feminism,” in *Deleuze and Ethics*, ed. Nathan Jun and Daniel W. Smith (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 63-88, pose responses to these criticisms.

⁷ I do not intend to claim that these are features that distinguish the “post-structuralist” ethics of Deleuze and Foucault from all other kinds of ethical thought (although, when taken in conjunction with particular ontological and epistemological views, these features might serve to distinguish their work in this way). John Dewey and other pragmatists, for instance, have much to contribute to the view of ethics as a matter of experimentation and practice. A discussion of the parallels and contrasts between pragmatism and post-structuralism is beyond the scope of this paper, but for an elaboration of such a comparison with respect to problematization see Paul Rabinow, “Dewey and Foucault: What’s the Problem?” *Foucault Studies* 11 (2011): 11-19, and for an account of how the two might be united for a more complete method of critical inquiry see Colin Koopman, “Genealogical Pragmatism: How History Matters for Foucault and Dewey,” *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 5 (2011): 531-559.

⁸ Although they break rather significantly with existentialist thinkers such as Sartre and de Beauvoir, the post-structuralist ethics of Foucault and Deleuze can be seen as following in the path of existential ethics in certain ways: in the fundamental ontological supposition that “existence precedes essence” and, hence, that ethical choices and actions cannot be determined through the application of pre-given rules but must be created through living. See Karen Vintges, “Must We Burn Foucault?: Ethics as Art of Living: Simone de Beauvoir and Michel Foucault,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 34 (2001): 165-181, for an account of Foucault as something of a post-existential thinker.

principles. The lens through which Deleuze and Foucault conceive creative activity differ slightly in their focus; Foucault directs his attention to how we might create ourselves through our ethical practices, of which the ancient practices of care of the self are one form, whereas Deleuze maintains that ethics is a matter of expressing specific aspects of being in the activity of thought, broadly construed as a set of diverse creative activities and expressive practices including art, science, and philosophy.⁹ Although it is generally acknowledged that Deleuzo-Foucaultian ethics entails creative activity, this activity is not just a matter of creating novelty in one's life: in order to make space for alternative modes of existence, one's creative endeavors must also be critical ones.

For both thinkers, the idea that ethics is a creative undertaking only makes sense in the context of a particular underlying ontology. Foucault expresses this connection between ontology and ethics by noting that "freedom is the ontological condition of ethics."¹⁰ Freedom, understood as an ontological condition, is a certain state of power relations. In order to engage in ethical relations with oneself and others, power relations must be mobile and fluid; one must be able to take up different types of practices that shape one's self and find forms of resistance to the more stagnant forms taken by power relations, for instance, rigid norms and oppressive social structures. Without such mobility, power relations are simply relations of domination.¹¹ In other words, freedom is a basic condition that makes possible myriad actions and relations. Deleuze's ethics and politics are likewise undergirded by an ontology that takes mobility – movement, change, and flux – as its starting point. Social structures and institutions, subjectivity and self-identity, linguistic expression, bodies of knowledge, and productive practices are all various ways of stabilizing an infinite and chaotic movement of alteration with greater and lesser degrees of rigidity. Creative practices and forms of thought are defined and distinguished from one another by the different ways they deal with this chaos. They give form to it in distinctive ways, producing, for instance, paintings, scientific equations, and philosophical concepts. Deleuze terms this infinite movement that underlies the forms of existence with which we are familiar, "the plane of immanence." Such chaotic movement makes transformation – becoming – possible and gives us the resources to resist our present conditions, but is also something to be feared insofar as it can undo the meanings that we make and can operate as an uncontrollable force of destruction. The plane of immanence thus operates in a comparable way to Foucault's idea of freedom: as the ontological condition that makes ethics possible.¹²

⁹ Creative thought is, of course, a form of ethical engagement for Deleuze and he also regards working on the self or, rather, the undoing and becoming of the self to be creative ethical activity. Likewise, Foucault also makes much of artistic creation in his earlier work.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, "L'éthique du souci de soi comme pratique de la liberté," in *Dits et écrits II* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 1531; "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1994), 284.

¹¹ Ibid 1539; 292.

¹² De Beauvoir proposes a similar conceptual distinction between "natural freedom" and "ethical freedom." Natural freedom, or freedom as an unavoidable condition, makes possible the pursuit of freedom as a value, that is, ethical forms of life that affirm freedom as a value. See *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Citadel Press, 1976), 24-25.

On the basis of this freedom, Foucault conceives of ethics as a way of taking up a certain kind of relationship to oneself characterized by “creative activity.” This relationship to oneself has four components: First, the “ethical substance” is the relevant subject of ethical practice, that with which we are concerned when we act (one’s intentions or feelings, for instance). Second, the “mode of subjectivation” is the style or type of engagement one has with oneself, for instance, one defined by a set of rules through which one is supposed to relate to oneself as a certain type of being; the mode of subjectivation operates on the basis of certain governing ideals that dictate how one ought to act given that one is, for instance, in Kantian ethics, a rational being. Third, the practices in which we engage – the practices of self – are those means through which we “change ourselves in order to become ethical subjects.” Fourth, the ends or goals are that to which we aspire in such practices.¹³ One takes up an ethical relationship to oneself by engaging in particular practices in accord with a particular mode of subjectivation, which shape aspects of one’s self (the ethical substance) so that they align with one’s telos.

The relationship of the self to itself is for Foucault the basis for ethics, and ethics is a matter of fashioning and transforming the self. It is only given the absence of foundations, of transcendence, that self-relation constitutes the basis for ethics. One takes up the project of determining for oneself the facets of the self on which one will work, the form of relation one will take, the concrete practices in which one will engage, and the end to which these activities are oriented.¹⁴ Moreover, given our susceptibility to relations of domination and to the consolidation of power relations into those of control and discipline, deliberate self-fashioning can comprise a counterpoint and form of resistance to the ways the self is shaped by biopolitical imperatives; there is, as Foucault notes, “no first or final point of resistance to political power other than in the relationship one has to oneself.”¹⁵ Whereas the telos of disciplinary power is a simultaneous increase in efficiency and docility, an aesthetics of existence, through which one takes one’s own experience and self as a site of transformation, is premised upon endeavoring to set one’s own ends.¹⁶ It is in this specific way that Foucault’s sense of ethics is indebted to the Kantian Enlightenment project. As Thomas Flynn notes, Foucault rejects the presumption of a “(meaning-giving) subject, while retaining those features of freedom and creativity which seem experientially or even conceptually linked to knowledge and power.”¹⁷ The aesthetic dimension of such self-creation is conceived in terms of the pursuit of a beautiful existence, per Ancient Greek practices of care of the self, and thus in terms of the pursuit of a particular style of living; the mode of subjectivation involves a practice of stylization. Yet, it is crucial to

¹³ Michel Foucault, “À propos de la généalogie de l’éthique: un aperçu du travail en cours,” in *Dits et écrits II* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 1212-1215; “On the Genealogy of Ethics: an Overview of Work in Progress,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1994), 263-265.

¹⁴ See Marli Huijer, “The Aesthetics of Existence in the Work of Michel Foucault,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, volume 25, no. 2 (1999): 70.

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2005), 252.

¹⁶ Foucault’s understanding of ethics as an “aesthetics of existence” is treated in depth in Huijer, “The Aesthetics of Existence in the Work of Michel Foucault” and Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg, “The Aesthetic and Ascetic Dimensions of an Ethic of Self-Fashioning: Nietzsche and Foucault,” *Parrhesia* 2 (2007): 44-65.

¹⁷ Flynn, “Truth and Subjectivation in the Later Foucault,” 539.

note, the aesthetic dimension also has much to do with sensation and feeling, and forging practices through which one senses and feels otherwise. An aesthetics of existence makes use of the ontological condition of freedom in the context of socio-political conditions in which one is urged and instructed to be a particular kind of subject in order to create for oneself alternative ways of living and reshape one's subjectivity.¹⁸

Deleuze articulates the relation between ethics and ontology most directly in his last book, *What is Philosophy?* Here he rather opaquely maintains that ethics is the "*amor fati* of philosophy" and that it can only be understood as endeavoring "not to be unworthy of what happens to us."¹⁹ These remarks have strong Stoic and Spinozist resonances, but Deleuze also develops this aside concerning ethical activity by elaborating a conception of philosophical thought that paves the way for understanding how ethics is connected to philosophy. These statements echo remarks made over twenty years earlier in *The Logic of Sense* in which he describes ethics as an activity in which one wills and expresses the event, that of which one should endeavor not to be unworthy. Thus, it is helpful to gloss what is meant by the "event."

The event of which Deleuze writes is not just any event – any happening, any determinate and actually existent episode or state of affairs – but rather is what he terms "the event of sense," the inexhaustible sense or meaning of what it is that happens to us. The concept "event" invokes that which underlies what happens and gives it meaning rather than any specific, finite, and localizable occurrences. The event of sense thus has a unique ontological status; this intangible sense is not reducible to the "what" that happens, but exceeds it, persists before and after it, and is embodied in other occurrences. Accordingly, when Deleuze speaks of the event as a wound, the wound is not limited to the physical injury alone, but rather is one that generates other effects (psychic wounds, for instance) and remains to be embodied in other traumas (although, it is important to note, this does not mean that the event has a negative sense or is somehow necessarily connected to suffering). Thought, as creative activity, endeavors to express this intangible something called the "event." The event itself might be inexpressible and thus might never get expressed, but the result of the attempt is thinking. Thus, philosophy and ethics are connected insofar as philosophy produces philosophical concepts in its attempt to express the event and, hence, is an ethical activity. In striving to give voice to this definitive aspect of being – the "event" that animates existence – philosophy becomes not just a creative activity but an ethical one as well.

What requires a bit more explanation, however, is what it means to express the event and why this would be an *ethical* activity. When a concept expresses the event it does not merely represent it or make it known to us, for the event is that which is unrepresentable in what happens and, moreover, concepts are not representational instances on Deleuze's account but creative constructs. Instead, philosophical thought endeavors to "extract an event

¹⁸ For a discussion of the difference between these two forms of subject formation, *assujettissement* and *subjectivation*, see Milchman and Rosenberg, "The Aesthetic and Ascetic Dimensions of an Ethic of Self-Fashioning: Nietzsche and Foucault," 55-56.

¹⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1991), 151; *What is Philosophy?* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 159. Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du Sens* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1969), 174; *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 149.

from things and beings, to set up the new event from things and beings, always to give them a new event..."²⁰ Accordingly, concepts are creations that express the pure form of the event. This pure form is that which is irreducible to particular manifestations, particular things that happen; it is a domain of potential sense, a plenitude and a wealth of meaning that allows us to continue moving and inspires future creation. It could be understood as transcending present happenings, but it does so in such a way that it remains present – immanent – in them, endowing them with sense and meaning and the ability to have their sense altered. If we were somehow to capture the event, encapsulate it, then we would reduce it to a single incarnation and thus deprive ourselves of transformation in meaning. The consequence of Deleuze's definition of philosophy is that philosophical thought maintains a specific kind of relationship to the chaotic infinite movement described above as the condition of ethics and of all transformation. By expressing the event, philosophy attempts to preserve the potential for change that inheres in chaos and does so in order to maintain thought's movement. Each concept forms "an event that surveys the whole of the lived"; in so testifying to an immeasurable potential rather than a particular instance of lived experience, it "shapes and reshapes the event in its own way," and produces meaning rather than reciting what has already happened.²¹

In brief, then, while for Foucault ethics is a creative activity in which one shapes one's self, for Deleuze it is an activity in which one creates concepts in philosophy and sensations in art, shaping the event in these creations. By uniting the two, we can understand creative self-relation as expressive of the fluidity of life, and expressive philosophical creation as necessarily entailing transformation of the self. Moreover, we can discern a shared norm at work in Foucault and Deleuze's ethical thought. Insofar as ethics is a creative stylistic and expressive activity, it demands openness and mobility; in more conventional terms, it demands freedom.²² Consequently, it is often maintained, rightly, that an opposition to the stasis of normalizing standards, transcendent meaning, and other rigid limitations placed upon creative transformation guides Foucault and Deleuze's ethics and politics.²³ Both seek the flexibility and mutability that will permit us to become new and unforeseen selves rather than remain constrained by the normalizing or molar forms of subjectivity that preclude self-transformation. Ethical practices and creative endeavors work toward this end, maximizing freedom by also operating as modes of resistance. Hence, this type of creative activity is necessarily also a form of critical engagement with one's present. In order to be truly a practice of freedom and

²⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 33.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

²² For a clear and convincing argument that Foucault implicitly relies on historically contingent norms of freedom and autonomy, see Chapter 8, "The Freedom of Philosophy" of Johanna Oksala's *Foucault on Freedom* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). On this point – the relationship between normativity and freedom – see Dianna Taylor, "Normativity and Normalization," for an astute argument that the idea of the 'norm' and normativity itself are normalizing, and rejecting the necessity of normative foundations is crucial to practicing freedom. Judith Butler's discussion in *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004) of the doubled nature of norms is also helpful for understanding the way normativity contains the potential to be both normalizing and aspirational.

²³ For an exemplary instance, see Ladelle McWhorter's discussion in *Bodies and Pleasures* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 193-199.

effect a departure from, rather than a solidification of, normalizing standards, ethics must involve a critical, genealogical perspective.²⁴ In the next section, I advance the claim that in addition to being creative and critical, Foucaultian-Deleuzian ethics also involves the activity of problematization. The notion of problematization makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of ethics as a critical practice and to comprehending the nuances of its normative salience.

II. The Role of Problematization in Ethical Activity

A simultaneously critical and creative ethical practice must also be one that presents a response to the problems of the present in which one finds oneself.²⁵ Here the terms “problem” and “response” have a specific sense: a problem is not a dilemma, a problem to be solved, and a response is not a resolution to the problem. In problematization, one constructs problems both by taking one’s activities and the conditions of one’s existence as something question-worthy, and by determining their main problematic features. Both Foucault and Deleuze afford the problem a significant place in their work. On Foucault’s understanding, thought necessarily involves problematization. In “On the Genealogy of Ethics” he remarks that he is not interested in performing a simple “history of solutions” but instead views his own work as “the genealogy of problems, of *problématiques*”;²⁶ likewise in the Introduction to *The History of Sexuality, v. II*, he notes that he “was led ... to substitute a history of ethical problematizations based on practices of the self” for a history of moral prohibitions.²⁷ Deleuze likewise thematizes the problem and the problematic, conceiving all modes of thought as presenting responses to problems.²⁸ For both, ethical activity, including the activity of thinking, can only take place through an assessment of the problems to which one must respond; ethics is a responsive engagement with one’s present, which is characterized by problematization.

Both Foucault and Deleuze arrive at this conception of ethics because they acknowledge that the practices in which we engage and through which we endeavor to resist oppressive structures can be as dangerous as those we seek to escape.²⁹ Lacking a critical per-

²⁴ See Bernauer, *Michel Foucault’s Force of Flight*, 16-20.

²⁵ Michel Foucault, “À propos de la généalogie de l’éthique: un aperçu du travail en cours,” in *Dits et écrits II* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 1210; “On the Genealogy of Ethics: an Overview of Work in Progress,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1994), 261.

²⁶ Ibid 1205/256.

²⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume II: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 13.

²⁸ Deleuze writes, “[p]roblems are the differential elements in thought, the genetic elements in the true.” See *Différence et Répétition* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968), 210; *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 162. Likewise, in *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari note that a “state of affairs [actuality] cannot be separated from the potential through which it takes effect and without which it would have no activity or development ... None of these operations [of thought] come about all by themselves; they all constitute ‘problems’” (153-154/145).

²⁹ See, for instance, Deleuze’s “Contrôle et devenir,” in *Pourparlers* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2003), 229-239; “Control and Becoming,” in *Negotiations* (New York: Columbia, 1990), 169-176. The danger present in tactics of resistance is also an important theme in *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

spective, we can tumble into what Deleuze calls “micro-fascism,” which Foucault describes as “the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us.”³⁰ Both of these consequences are instances of a certain type of solidification, in which one seeks certainty and a foundation in a “true self”;³¹ however, they arise not only as a product of myths about stability, identity, unity, and truth, but also because of the very ontological conditions that make ethical relations possible: freedom, mobility and mutability. The tendency to consolidate the self around a point of certainty emerges precisely because there is no longer any transcendent ground for ethics, only an opening for change and the possibility for the enactment of styles of living; such an opening makes possible not only deviation from conventional standards but also the re-imposition of fixed and oppositional norms (which Deleuze dubs “reterritorialization”). The ontological condition of ethics – freedom or the plane of immanence – makes unethical forms of existence possible as well because it is openness to all change and because it generates continual shifting. Indeed, it is only in such a context that ethics is called for. As Foucault notes, “everything is dangerous” and “if everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do.”³² Consequently, if ethics is to be “the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection,” as Foucault defines it, then it must be a practice that comprehends the dangers we face, especially the dangers inherent in open-ended creation.³³ Given an ontology of mobility, the absence of foundation and transcendence, and the provocation to create, ethics must involve more than doing right and being good, whatever form right and good take. Rather, ethics entails comprehending and seeking to counteract the dangers, lapses, and potentially damaging tendencies within creative expression, even and especially within the creative enactment of what we deem “good” and “right”; only thus can “good” and “right” have significance as immanent values.³⁴ Therefore, in the context of ontological freedom – as fundamental mobility and mutability – problematization is all the more necessary.

³⁰ Michel Foucault, Preface to *Anti-Oedipus*, xiii.

³¹ One instance of micro-fascism is the “Californian cult of the self” of which Foucault is wary because of the pretense that one possesses an underlying “true self” (“À propos de la généalogie de l’éthique: un aperçu du travail en cours,” 1221; “On the Genealogy of Ethics: an Overview of Work in Progress,” 271). Cressida Heyes’ *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies* (New York: Oxford, 2007) offers an insightful account of normalizing practices of self-creation that pass themselves off as liberatory forms of care of the self. On her understanding, the discourse of authentic and true self-identity that is used to justify cosmetic surgery procedures, in one example, is at the core of their normalizing force. Heyes shows that far from being the apolitical and unsexist justification it purports to be (i.e., because it does not appeal to sexist ideals of beauty), having surgery in order to make one’s external appearance consonant with one’s inner self is a paradigmatic instance of normalization precisely because of this appeal to an authentic inner identity.

³² “À propos de la généalogie de l’éthique: un aperçu du travail en cours,” 1205; “On the Genealogy of Ethics: an Overview of Work in Progress,” 256.

³³ “L’éthique du souci de soi comme pratique de la liberté,” in *Dits et écrits II*, 1527-1548. Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 1531; “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1994), 284.

³⁴ Kolodny depicts Foucault as eschewing normative claims because of a wariness of theory and its tenuous relation to practice: “To capitulate to his critics’ demands for a theory would have sacrificed his point. It would have suggested that the real task facing the political philosopher was the articulation of a theory,

In a discussion of “Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations,” Foucault specifies that it is problematization that distinguishes the history of thought from both the history of ideas and the history of mentalities or behaviors and attitudes. Thought, which is characterized by problems and problematizations, is unique because it is

what allows one to step back from this way of acting or reacting, to give it to oneself as an object of thought and to interrogate it about its meaning, its conditions, and its ends. Thought is freedom in relation to what one does, the movement by which one detaches oneself from it, constitutes it as an object and reflects on it as a problem.³⁵

Problematization, therefore, is not just a way of doing historical analysis but is the constitutive activity of a “historical ontology of ourselves” and our present.³⁶ This form of thinking is freedom – “thought is freedom” – because in it ontological freedom takes its “considered form”; in this way, freedom becomes the undertaking of ethical practice in contradistinction to freedom as “the ontological condition of ethics.”³⁷ Problematization is the form of reflection that makes freedom ethical rather than just a state of insistent openness to change.³⁸ Just as for Deleuze,

instead of the arduous and uncertain work of developing the ethos to ensure that theory is properly realized” (“The Ethics of Cryptonormativism,” 73). What Foucault rejects is not normativity per se but theoretical expressions of norms that eclipse, contradict, or fail to realize themselves in practice, in ethos. Normative theory is dangerous – not in the sense of provoking further action and thought – in the sense that it occludes the “uncertain work” needed to render it meaningful and prevents us from perceiving the dangers to which it may give rise. Taylor’s conclusion that, in rejecting normative *foundations*, Foucault is rejecting certainty makes the stakes of Foucault’s anti-foundational stance even clearer: “For Habermas, some certainty about the world – even if only a tiny sliver – is possible. For Foucault, not only is certainty impossible, our desire for it is shaped by modern modes of thought that are interconnected with a drive for control and domination; as such, not only certainty but the desire for it needs to be critically analyzed and resisted. In sum, with Foucault we do not get certainty. With Habermas we do not get it, either; the problem is that we do get the empty belief that we can have it, a belief that encourages us to search for certainty rather than to find effective ways of resisting domination and promoting freedom within a world without it” (“Normativity and Normalization,” 59).

³⁵ Michel Foucault, “Polémique, politique, et problématisations,” in *Dits et écrits II* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 1416; “Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1994), 117.

³⁶ Michel Foucault, “Qu’est-ce que les Lumières?” in *Dits et écrits II* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 1394; “What is Enlightenment?” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1994), 316.

This conceptualization of problematization is reiterated in the Introduction to *The History of Sexuality, Volume II* (9-13). There is a slight difference in the way Foucault formulates the idea of problematization: on the one hand, problematizations exist as problems that arise in a particular historical epoch and social circumstances (“...human beings ‘problematize’ what they are, what they do, and the world in which they live” by taking sexuality to be an issue, for example) (10). On the other hand, philosophy as a meta activity of problematization problematizes these problematizations. The contrast is, of course, not one between practice and theory – since philosophical problematization is itself part of a style of living – but between taking something (e.g., sexual desires) as an object of concern and taking that concern as an object of concern (in genealogy).

³⁷ My thanks to Dianna Taylor for pointing out the need to delineate this difference more precisely.

³⁸ See Oksala’s delineation of four types of freedom in Foucault’s work for a similar account of the difference between freedom as “ontological contingency” and “practices of freedom” (*Foucault on Freedom*, 189-191).

philosophy is that mode of thought that both delineates and opens a movement beyond the dimensions of being that define the present, so for Foucault philosophy as problematizing thought is “the critical work that thought brings to bear on itself[,]” and a “test by which ... one undergoes changes.”³⁹ One of the most important aspects of problematization stems from the fact that problems are not given to us ready-made, as both Foucault and Deleuze emphasize. A problem is not a given or even that which appears to be most problematic or controversial; indeed, the most pressing problems can be the least evident ones.⁴⁰ Rather, problems must be composed and determined, problematized. The process of problematization constitutes the problem, determines its contours, and thus shapes the potential array of responses. Thus, it is only through the determination of problems – the particular problems of our time – that we can come to grasp what the present dangers are. Problematization is fundamentally an ethical project because it has the potential to open certain possibilities and foreclose others. On this understanding, problematization is a vital component of the task of critique. Problematization enables us to transform “a group of obstacles and difficulties into problems to which the diverse solutions will attempt to produce a response[,]” and problematization gives us that reflective distance from what we do.⁴¹ When taken as an essential component of an ethic, “problematization” expands the idea of “critique” in specific ways. Most significantly, a problem demands a response. Critique, in its most positive and constructive sense, implies resistance to that which one criticizes and a movement against, and then beyond, its limits; as on Deleuze and Foucault’s understanding, critique is necessarily creative. Creativity, though, remains an indefinite criterion; the creation of novel styles of living is a manifestation of ontological freedom and, indeed, may even maximize this condition of freedom rather than restrict it, but novelty in itself does not guarantee resistance or enable us to understand the conditions of our existence better. Problematization, though, contributes something more to Foucaultian-Deleuzian ethics: it demands that our critical and creative activities also be *responsive* ones. As with the idea of a problem, we must understand “response” here in a very particular sense in order to elaborate the distinctive contribution of this concept.

Deleuze’s ontology of the problem and question provide valuable resources for grasping this difference in sense. As he develops the concept in *Difference and Repetition*, problems are occasions for the production of thought, instigating the activity of problematization: “*questions express the relation between problems and the imperatives from which they proceed. ... Problems or Ideas emanate from imperatives of adventure or from events which appear in the form of questions.*”⁴² That is, questions and the problems that develop out of them provoke cases of solution, but the problems remain constitutively open by persisting and remaining present in

³⁹ Introduction to *The History of Sexuality, Volume II*, 9.

⁴⁰ As Foucault notes, power is apt at hiding itself and, as Heyes elaborates, “normalization typically robs subjects of effective practices of *critique*” such that we may not see that which most requires problematization and critical analysis (*Self-Transformations*, 117).

⁴¹ Michel Foucault, “Polémique, politique, et problématisations,” 1417; “Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations,” 118.

⁴² *Difference and Repetition*, 255/197. See Chapters Three and Four as well as of Deleuze’s *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone, 1991), which anticipates the discussions in *Difference and Repetition*.

those cases of solution; thus, problems keep open the potential for further response.⁴³ For this reason Deleuze conceives of the question-problem as differential; it retains the potential to generate difference in virtue of its fundamental openness. To understand more precisely what is meant by response, the activity of *responding* to a problem can be contrasted with that of *solving* a problem.⁴⁴

The first main difference between response and solution is that the responses that we formulate are provisional not final; problems, in this sense, are never *solved* but are only something that demand response. A solution entails a closure and completion that a response necessarily relinquishes. Correspondingly, if our stance toward normalizing demands – our attempt at a solution to the problem of normalization – is simply to refuse to cede to them, then we merely attempt to break with a problem and have done with it, perhaps even pursuing some new line of activity; we purport to have solved it and abandon it while failing to reckon with it. The second main difference between the activities of response and solution is that in solving a problem we direct ourselves to a problem that is already posed, whereas problematization requires working both to frame the problem and to comprehend the way it has been constituted and what the conditions of its constitution contribute to or take away from our understanding. Our response, then, is not to the problem as a dilemma but to the conditions of its emergence, its problematic structure. In attempting to solve rather than respond to a problem, we are more likely to forsake the vital task of determining the problem, specifying its conditions and contours, instead assuming that it is self-evident and mistaking its effects for its condition. In so doing, we remain ignorant of its basis and lasting effects, and are unable to respond effectively to them. With a solution, we simply demand an answer to a ready-made issue. With response, an answer is required that refers back to the problem not just as a difficulty to be managed but as a historically contingent and unique development, the very conditions of which are vital to comprehending how to respond. As Colin Koopman notes, the uniqueness of Foucault's work consists in showing "how these contingencies came to be what they are such that they might become otherwise than we have them."⁴⁵ By responding, we speak directly to a problem by addressing its conditions. This stipulation leads to the third main difference, which is that a response does not operate as a resolution to a problem, but expresses and gives voice to the problem itself, making the depth of the difficulty appear to us.⁴⁶ Responsive practices contribute to a greater understanding of those dangers that are

⁴³ Ibid, 212/163.

⁴⁴ See *ibid*, 204-213/157-164.

⁴⁵ "Foucault Across the Disciplines: Introductory Notes on Contingency in Critical Inquiry," *History of the Human Sciences*, volume 24, no.1 (2011): 8. Koopman identifies two senses of contingency, one of which indicates *that* particular configurations of power are contingent (rather than necessary or inevitable) and the other of which indicates *how* these contingent configurations are produced. He emphasizes the salience of the second, empirical sense of contingency to Foucault's thought: "Foucault's way of showing that discipline is optional was to show how discipline has been contingently made up in such a way as to be potentially revisable" (6).

⁴⁶ For an example, we can see in Judith Butler's analysis of gender performativity and the potentially subversive effects of drag an instance of a response to the problem of normative gender that lays bare the problem itself; if it is efficacious in its attempts at subversion, gender parody calls attention to the tenuousness of normative gender, to the way norms of gender intelligibility depend on repetitive iteration rather than being

posed to us in our present existence rather than simply permitting us to avoid or overcome them. So, as Dianna Taylor observes, “challenging limits is not the same as extricating oneself from them”; instead, challenging and resisting the limitations of the present leads to “clarification ... [which] can be understood in terms of explication and delineation (making overt what has been taken for granted) which is intended to yield insight into function and, thus, facilitate creative negotiation.”⁴⁷ In order to respond to what is perhaps the most persistent problem – the fact of our own freedom and the fact that “everything is dangerous” – the practices in which we engage, through which we care for our selves, will necessarily be ones that expose the problem itself and negotiate its terrain.

If we take the conflict surrounding same-sex marriage as an example of a problem that demands ethical response, we can see the necessity of inventing a response that speaks to the conditions of the problem. A simple *solution* to the controversy might be to permit same-sex marriage on a state-to-state basis, as appears to be happening at present, or to introduce federally sanctioned civil unions for same-sex couples that grant all the privileges afforded to married heterosexual couples or, a compromise that some have suggested, to institute such civil unions with a religious conscience provision.⁴⁸ These solutions, however, take the problem as a given: a simple case of conflicting beliefs about the institution of marriage. Same-sex marriage brings to light this problem and the solution to the problem involves reconciling the demand for the civil rights that accompany marriage with the concerns of Christian morality and/or about freedom of religious conscience. If we are to problematize and respond rather than just solve, however, we must “step back from this way of acting or reacting ... [and] interrogate it about its meaning, its conditions, and its ends.”⁴⁹ Thus, the question becomes not simply one of how we might redress an injustice by extending the privileges conferred on individuals through marriage to those in same-sex relationships, but one of the conditions, meaning, and ends of marriage itself as a socially and legally sanctioned form of relationship.⁵⁰ A response in this case requires problematizing marriage itself. Such a problematization would include an analysis of the historical conditions of the emergence of the institution of marriage in its concrete social and economic manifestations, the function marriage has performed as a bio-political institution, namely the way it operates to discourage certain forms of relationship and ways of living and to promote others (namely the nuclear family and what cultural critic Laura Kipnis dubs “domestic coupledom”), and the shifting significances it has

the natural effects of sex. The aim of subversive drag performances is to reveal the instability of the distinction between what is assumed to be natural, real gender and what is deemed illusory, artificial gender.

⁴⁷ “Foucault’s Ethos: Guide(post) for Change,” in *Feminism and the Final Foucault*, ed. Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintges (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 268.

⁴⁸ See Brook Sadler, “Re-thinking Civil Unions and Same-Sex Marriage,” *Monist* 91, 3&4 (2008): 578-605; David Blankenhorn and Jonathan Rauch’s “A Reconciliation on Gay Marriage” in the *NY Times* (2009).

⁴⁹ Michel Foucault, “Polémique, politique, et problématisations,” 1416; “Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations,” 117.

⁵⁰ On this topic see Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

had.⁵¹ Whereas a solution glosses over these conditions and proposes an answer based only on the narrowly delineated contours of an issue – e.g., religion versus rights – response is directed toward comprehension of and engagement with them.

How might this notion of response pertain to ethical *activities*? Foucault writes that the “ethical problem [is one] of the definition of practices of freedom”, which implies that the ethical problem is one of distinguishing between those practices that maintain or expand the domain in which we are free to create ourselves and those practices that sustain restrictions on that domain, shoring up an established order.⁵² Yet, for practices of freedom to be responsive and ethical ones, they must do more than just refrain from participating in and reinscribing oppressive norms and social structures.⁵³ To engage in a new or different way of living, for instance, is not the same as devising a way of life that responds to the problems of one’s present. In other words, novelty and transgression cannot be equated with responsive resistance. A responsive ethical practice will be novel insofar as it breaks with the limitations of the modes of life already available, but it will also be grounded in a comprehension of both the socio-historical conditions in which it is undertaken and its possible complicity in that which it resists. That is, responsive ethical practices are practices that problematize through doing.

To illustrate this point, I turn to two examples of practices of self-formation given by Ladelle McWhorter and Cressida Heyes in their recent books on Foucault. In *Bodies and Pleasures*, McWhorter offers a recollection of her first foray into gardening and her experiences tending to the soil through composting; her account is an example of an embodied practice that “intensified the movement away from mind/body dualism.”⁵⁴ The problem upon which light is shed by way of her responsive activity is that of mind/body dualism and its implications for our everyday modes of being. Her description also demonstrates how the practices through which we create and care for our selves are also responsive to present problems. Although the inspiration to garden originated from a desire for inexpensive flavorful tomatoes, McWhorter finds that she is drawn into a different perspective on and relationship to the world of plants, animals, and dirt. Seeing her neighbors’ fertilizer-fed tomato plants rapidly outgrowing hers, she realizes the need to feed her seedlings yet determines that it is not just the plants that need nourishment but the soil. Thus begins a meditation on dirt, that abject basis of all food: though “most people treat dirt as nothing more than the place where plants happen to be, like a kind of platform that plants stand on, or in[,]” McWhorter avers that dirt is “far from just some sort of inert platform” and is actually “a highly complex phenomenon with an intricate functional structure that can suffer damage and can also repair itself if damage isn’t too severe.”⁵⁵ Her gardening is thus a way of formulating a problem, which is not

⁵¹ See Laura Kipnis, *Against Love* (New York: Vintage, 2004) for a Marxist/Foucaultian critique of the normalizing role love and marriage play in contemporary society, and Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

⁵² “L’éthique du souci de soi comme pratique de la liberté,” 1529; “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 283.

⁵³ Heyes argues similarly when she emphasizes that “*resistance* understood simply as *refusal* will fail” (*Self-Transformations*, 92).

⁵⁴ *Bodies and Pleasures*, 61.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 165-166.

really the lack of good tomatoes but rather a set of attitudes about the natural world and human engagement with it that encourage us to take its support for granted, and which are exemplary of and informed by dualism.⁵⁶ As ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood terms it, the problem is one of a “denied dependency” that is only made possible by a dualistic framework that subordinates nature to culture, matter to mind, physical labor to intellectual labor, and so on.⁵⁷ As one aspect of hierarchical dualism, denied dependency devalues not only land, animals, but also agrarian culture and the work on the land that supplies us with that which is vitally necessary: food.⁵⁸ The problem of how we conceive dirt and why we conceive it in this way is not immediately apparent (not pregiven), but through a responsive engagement in the activity of gardening, McWhorter develops an attunement to the plants and their well-being. The way in which she engages in this practice allows her to lay out this problem and respond by interacting with dirt in a way that recognizes it as the complicated, vital source of sustenance that it is. McWhorter’s analysis of and changed relation to dirt clarifies what is problematic about our pervasive indifference to, and even disdain for, the stuff; it shows both that our attitudes about the materials and creatures that sustain us must be brought into question, and that a certain limited way of conceiving them conditions and perpetuates environmental degradation. Thus, a practice such as gardening has implications for our interactions with the natural world and the others with whom we share it because it can facilitate shifting those attitudes about earth, soil, plants, and those who tend them. It is an ethical practice not just because it involves a certain *ethos* that shapes the self but because, by problematizing the terrain we inhabit, it enables us to understand better what is at stake in our present and how to maneuver within it.

In another instance of a problem stemming from mind/body dualism, Cressida Heyes describes the transformative power of her practice of yoga in her compelling book *Self-Transformations*. The example derives its force from the resistance it poses to normalized forms of embodied subjectivity. Although yoga is often taken up merely for the physical benefits of the practice, Heyes suggests that the values and the understanding of the mind/body relationship that it offers make it a “counterattack to the teleology of corporeal normalization.”⁵⁹ Specifically, yogic philosophy eschews competition and “goal-oriented attitude[s]”; the practice is individualized rather than comparative, and one works within and with the limitations of one’s body in the present moment rather than seeking an ideal and idealized physical form. One does not seek to master the body through mental determination as teleological physical

⁵⁶ On the topic of human attitudes toward nature in connection with the practice of gardening see Michael Pollan, *Second Nature: a gardener’s education* (New York: Delta, 1991).

⁵⁷ See Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

⁵⁸ This set of attitudes toward nature has significant implications for environmental justice. In regarding plants and the earth in which they grow as mere tools for human use, by “instrumentalizing” them as Plumwood puts the point, we facilitate short-sighted, damaging use. For instance, chemical and fuel dependent industrial agriculture requires heavy inputs in the form of fertilizer, pesticide, herbicide, and/or fungicide; said chemicals are often carcinogenic and have serious negative impacts on human and ecosystem health. In treating soil as a mere “inert platform,” into which some needed chemical components must be inserted, rather than a vital system, industrial agriculture is based upon hierarchical dualism.

⁵⁹ Heyes, *Self-Transformations*, 129.

activity often demands, but perhaps to calm the mind through bodily engagement. Consequently, it requires acceptance of and kindness toward one's body, and the ability to perceive it in terms of how it works, how it feels, and what it can do in contrast to the conventional norms of "visual judgment" that encourage us to pick out flaws, evaluate our bodies in relation to others, and work to better them in accord with the ideal of bodily beauty.⁶⁰

Although yoga can lead to transformations – both physical and emotional or psychological – these are not the goal of the practice and such transformations are unforeseen: "one never knows, exactly, how one will be transformed by yoga."⁶¹ When Heyes notes that she "both lost weight and learned lightness" from yoga, she also observes that "the former was part of a teleological apparatus that allowed of no deviation (although it enabled me temporarily to feel better because my body conformed more closely to a social norm) while the latter was concerned with developing my capacities without intensifying my dependence."⁶² Even though weight loss is often touted as one of the benefits of regular yoga practice, losing weight is not the truly transformative aspect of the practice; instead of just enhancing one's capacities, losing weight can bind one to the norm of a slender body and deepen adherence to that norm. Because yoga is avowedly non-teleological, such a fixation on the attaining that bodily ideal is foreign to the practice. In contrast, yogic philosophy asks us to release ourselves from striving and attachment, which thus obliges us to perceive those norms and ideals to which we are (perhaps overly) attached as such: as contingent and externally imposed ideals that bear not on activity but appearance.⁶³ Thus, undertaken genuinely, yoga is a practice that demands that one be attuned to its potential for being co-opted and taken up in the service of restrictive norms, attuned to the dangers that attend freedom. On Heyes' account and in my experience as well, it is a practice of ethical resistance not just because it embraces values different from those that are dominant in contemporary Western society (non-teleological, non-competitive, non-egoistic values), but because it is in fact a way of responding to what one finds problematic about that society and can allow one to walk the fine line between responsive resistance and danger. As Heyes' account shows, experiencing one's body in an utterly different way can allow one to determine the problem of bodily normalization – including the possibility that the ways we care for and creatively engage our bodies may founder, sliding into normalization – all the more precisely and then, perhaps, to know better how to respond to it in other circumstances as well.

By focusing upon the role of problematization in Deleuze and Foucault's ethics, I sought to draw attention not only to the way in which ethics is a matter of creative, critical practices but, further, to the way ethics involves a set of *expressive* practices. What is meant by expressive is not the expression of a given meaning, of the self, or of a pre-given problem. Expressive activities are those that do not simply "do," but rather speak to the "why" behind

⁶⁰ Ibid, 130.

⁶¹ Ibid, 129.

⁶² Ibid, 130.

⁶³ As Heyes understands it, yoga also enables us to conceive a different kind of relationship between freedom and necessity: "The practice of yoga teaches one to accept one's body as deeply unpredictable and, sometimes, immutable – yet this is a fact rather than a failure, to be worked with philosophically and spiritually, rather than a cause for despair because a certain normalized trajectory is blocked" (ibid, 132).

this doing, the conditions that make necessary this “doing” rather than some other.⁶⁴ If problematization entails a responsive ethics, this ethics responds both to the particular historical and political exigencies that compose our present, and to the rather ambiguously open condition of freedom that makes possible creative acts. For both thinkers, ethical practices are those that speak to something fundamental about existence, the danger of freedom or chaotic flux, and more importantly to the way this shifting terrain shapes us by making possible both normalization and resistance. Thus, for our responses to be responsive rather than attempts at problem solving, they must reckon with both of these types of conditions: the historically and socially contingent conditions of our present milieu, and the basic mutability of power relations that constitutes freedom. These basic features – historical contingency and ontological mobility – entail that ethics involve problematization and responsiveness. Such twofold responsiveness is necessary because this dual condition makes it possible for acts of resistance to be co-opted and normalizing practices to parade as oppositional. In this context, ethical practices are those that are undertaken with awareness of this possible usurpation and the mechanisms behind it rather than under the illusion that we have escaped such a possibility.

III. A Responsive Ethics

In this last section, I propose that accentuating the themes of “response” and “responsiveness” in Foucault and Deleuze’s thought develops their conception of ethics in a more complete fashion. By bringing together particular components of Foucault and Deleuze’s thinking as it pertains to the ethical activities of problematization and responsiveness, we remedy what might be viewed as flaws in the ethics/politics of each. In particular, Deleuze can supply a conception of otherness that Foucault perhaps lacks and Foucault can supply both a conception of self-relation as a creative process and a historical orientation that Deleuze perhaps lacks.⁶⁵

Here I do not intend to claim that Foucault’s ethics is truly solipsistic and, hence, not viable or that Deleuze’s philosophy is truly ahistorical and, hence, apolitical.⁶⁶ Rather, these are objections made concerning the ethical viability of their work that need to be addressed and dismissed in order to assert the salience of a Foucaultian-Deleuzian ethics for contemporary ethical relations. One way to respond to these critiques is to articulate how Deleuzian

⁶⁴ We can think of expression as style if we understand style in a robust sense. For an account of such a concept of Foucaultian style see Kevin Lamb, “Foucault’s Aestheticism,” *Diacritics* volume 35, no. 2 (2005): 43-64.

⁶⁵ The flaws, objections, or qualms with which I am concerned are more specific versions of the general criticism of Foucault by thinkers such as Habermas, Fraser, and Charles Taylor, *op. cit.*, that Foucault’s work lacks a normative foundation or component that is necessary to support its own claims about resistance, and/or must imply such normativity. See also Chapter Three of McWhorter, *Bodies and Pleasures*, “Why I Shouldn’t Like Foucault ... So They Say,” for an analysis and refutation of three lines of criticism that are often levied against the ethical and political aspects of Foucault’s thought.

⁶⁶ For recent examples of this criticism of Deleuze see Peter Hallward, *Out of this World: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation* (New York: Verso, 2006), who levies the charge that Deleuze’s philosophy is ahistorical and, ultimately, apolitical, and Rosalyn Diprose, “What is (Feminist) Philosophy?” *Hypatia* volume 15, no. 2 (2000): 120. For a rejoinder to Hallward, see my “Review of Peter Hallward’s *Out of this World: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation*,” *Continental Philosophy Review* volume 42, no. 3 (2009): 429-434.

and Foucaultian ethics are necessarily responsive ones:⁶⁷ since a responsive ethic of necessity entails ethical response to others and in light of one's historical context, the objections concerning solipsism and ahistoricity hold little water. In the context of problematization – which both share – responsive relations with others, with self, and with history are fundamental. Thus, if ethics – as a creative and critical activity – principally involves problematization, then it is of vital importance to understand the nature of one's relations with others and one's self, the history of one's society and culture, and the ways history conditions relations with self and others. If we view their ethics as complementary, as variations on the same underlying idea that ethics demands problematization and response, then the criticisms that genuine alterity is absent in Foucault's work or that Deleuze eschews historical context are rendered less coherent. Further, if Foucaultian-Deleuzian ethics is one of problematization, then it must respond to the problems it itself poses; it is certainly not a model for ethics fixed in its articulation by Foucault or by Deleuze, but a conception of ethics that is self-correcting insofar as it is critical and responsive.

With regard to the contention that Foucault's aesthetics of self-creation succumbs to solipsism, it is clear that Foucault is avowedly interested in *self*-transformation and could be understood to assign secondary importance to relations with others. One of the most striking claims he makes in this regard occurs in the context of a discussion of ancient practices of care of the self. Foucault states that the relation to the self is “ethically prior in that the relationship with oneself is ontologically prior[.]” seeming to relegate ethical relations with others to an ancillary role.⁶⁸ Yet, he also confirms in the first place that he considers the care of the self to be the form that relations to self took in antiquity and not a prototype for self-relation in general.⁶⁹ One of the simplest ways of interpreting this stipulation is as an assertion of the idea that one's self must be formed and one must be able to conduct oneself ethically (in relationship to oneself) before one can engage in ethical relations with others. Yet, ethics takes diverse forms in distinct periods, particularly with respect to the modes of subjectivation or forms of self-relation employed and the “ethical substance” or subject of ethical activity, and takes singular and individualized forms depending upon how particular individuals embody, invent, and give life to ethical practices. Thus, there is no reason to believe that the relationship to oneself is always ontologically and ethically prior to relationships with others. Such a conception may be particular to ancient ethics and contemporary ethics – given widespread recognition of the way others shape the self – may entail that ethical self-relation can only take place through ethical relation to others. Ultimately, however, Foucault does define ethics primarily as self-relation, as “the relationship you have to yourself when you act.”⁷⁰

⁶⁷ See also Lynne Huffer, “Foucault's Ethical *Ars Erotica*” *SubStance* volume 38, no. 3 (2009): 125-147, who claims that “his conception of ethical alterity demands an attention to the lived specificities of the concrete world” (126).

⁶⁸ “L'éthique du souci de soi comme pratique de la liberté,” 1534; “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 287.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 1531/285.

⁷⁰ Michel Foucault, “Michel Foucault: An Interview by Stephen Riggins,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1994), 131. For critiques of Foucault's emphasis on self-relation and neglect of interpersonal relations see Chapter Nine of Oksala's *Foucault on Freedom*, “The Other,” and

Deleuze's philosophy, although labeled a philosophy of difference, is not usually thought of as one that emphasizes alterity and relations with others. Nevertheless, both *A Thousand Plateaus* and *What is Philosophy?* underscore the importance of engaging in self-transformation or becoming with others. Indeed, the process of transformation that Deleuze thematizes as "becoming" is always a matter of becoming-with others; it is only through interaction and connection with others and their other ways of being that one transforms oneself.⁷¹ This relation of becoming is not at all a way of utilizing others as means for the creation and transformation of one's self.⁷² Rather, such a logic of becoming involves a subtle understanding of responsibility with respect to others. We do not, on Deleuze's understanding, have a responsibility to others but rather for them, meaning *before* [*devant*] them, facing them, in front of them. The sense of this "for" is "not 'for their benefit,' or yet 'in their place.'...[rather] It is a question of becoming."⁷³ Thus, this notion of responsibility is not a traditional one in which one is obligated to another in virtue of an agreement made or a duty had.⁷⁴ If responsibility is a matter of becoming then it cannot be undertaken for others – we cannot become for them – but must be undertaken in responsive relation to them. We find here a concept of responsibility as responsiveness, in which we are responsible for facilitating the becoming of others through our own becoming, enabling the self-transformation of others through our own self-transformation, and, in so doing, responding to them rather than assuming responsibility for them. On Deleuze and Guattari's account, therefore, a relation to self necessarily involves relations with others and relations with others necessarily involve self-relation.

Jean Grimshaw, "Practices of Freedom," in *Up Against Foucault*, ed. Caroline Ramazanoglu (New York: Routledge, 1993), 51-72.

⁷¹ This is, of course, all a matter of the ontology of becoming in which multiplicities enter into relationship with one another, forming an assemblage and transforming one another through the passage of potentials from one to the other. The "other" with which one enters into relation thus destabilizes the self.

⁷² This kind of criticism has been levied against Deleuze and Guattari's account of becoming by feminist critics who are concerned with the concept of "becoming-woman" in particular. For an account of this kind of criticism and a response to this interpretation of the concept, see my "Responsive Becoming: Ethics between Deleuze and Feminism."

⁷³ *What is Philosophy?*, 105/109.

⁷⁴ This notion of responsibility also differs from the likewise untraditional formulation of the notion found in the work of Emmanuel Levinas. A full treatment of the differences between Levinasian responsibility and Deleuzian/Foucaultian responsibility is beyond the scope of this paper, so it will have to suffice to note that for Levinas responsibility is a fundamental and irrevocable structure of openness to the other that one cannot renounce or escape; it is constitutive of subjectivity and is an utterly singular experience. The conception of responsibility that can be drawn out of a reading of Deleuze and Foucault takes responsibility to be a more localized phenomenon and mode of relation – a form of response to particular conditions and particular others – rather than a primordial structure. See Chapter Nine of Oksala, *Foucault on Freedom* for an argument in favor of the Levinasian conception of responsibility and ethical subjectivity against Foucault's, and Ladelle McWhorter, "Review of Johanna Oksala" *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, <http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=4701> (Nov. 10, 2005), for a reply to this critique. For an argument in favor of Foucault's understanding of ethical subjectivity in contrast to Levinas', see A.B. Hofmeyr, "The Metaphysics of Foucault's Ethics: Succeeding Where Levinas Fails," *South African Journal of Philosophy* volume 25, no. 2 (2006): 113-125.

That self-transformation unavoidably pertains to relations with others is even more evident within a Foucaultian model, in which the self is formed in relation to others because it is constituted through norms and relations of power/knowledge that are only possible in a social milieu.⁷⁵ Insofar as they are the very foundation of the self, relations with others thus take ontological priority over relations with oneself. When one involves oneself in self-creating activities, one fashions oneself in a social context; the choices one makes, the projects one adopts, and the ideals one holds cannot but be conditioned by the milieu that one shares with others. In this milieu, what one does with and for oneself, what one wants for oneself, is never separate from what one does with and for others, and wants for them.⁷⁶ In creating ourselves, we are responsible before others because we stand in relation to them as part of their social milieu, part of the context in which they take up their own relations to self, and our relations with them are constitutive. Thus, on this model, ethical relations with others do not occupy a purified domain divorced from the social context in which these relations take place and the social context – replete with norms, customs, prejudices, and inequality – is itself the object of ethical response. As Judith Butler aptly writes about ethical relations to others, “though I thought I was having a relation to ‘you,’ I find that I am caught up in a struggle with norms.”⁷⁷ An ethical response is one that responds to those norms as well as responding to others in their relation to them; it confronts the social context – its normative pressures, its hierarchies – in a way that allows self and others to transform themselves. The idea that relations with self always entail relations with others supplements the Foucaultian ethics of self-creation by requiring that we more explicitly conceive of practices of self-creation as ones in which we engage with and respond to others. Indeed, as Benda Hofmeyr notes, “the other concerns the Foucaultian subject, because the other is never absolutely outside-me.”⁷⁸

On the second point of critique, Deleuze’s philosophy is alleged to take an ahistorical perspective, rendering it incompatible with a critical and responsive ethics and politics. Indeed, unlike Foucault, he surely is more interested in structures than their historical contexts. The virtual and the infinite chaotic movement described above do “transcend” history – understood as a set of empirical states of affairs – in the sense that they are non-localizable sources of potential and infuse history with the force that makes it move. Foucault’s reflections in *What is Enlightenment?*, however, demonstrate clearly that problematization must be a

⁷⁵ Sensitive readers of Foucault make note of this point. See Taylor, “Foucault’s Ethos: Guide(post) for Change,” 266-267; Margaret McLaren, “Foucault and Feminism: Power, Resistance, Freedom,” in *Feminism and the Final Foucault*, ed. Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintges, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 227; Oksala, *Foucault on Freedom*, 167.

⁷⁶ Susan Bordo, *Twilight Zones: The Hidden Life of Cultural Images from Plato to O.J.* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997) addresses our relationship to our contemporary culture from a Foucaultian perspective, emphasizing the way we are not merely consumers of culture but are makers of it as well. With this role – that of makers of culture and cultural norms – comes an extended sense of responsibility, she contends.

⁷⁷ *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham, 2005), 26. Butler further suggests that this understanding of the ethical (in this instance, as it is manifest in the relation between self and other) as conditioned by the social (in particular, the “social dimension of normativity”) can explain “Foucault’s failure to think the other” (23). Situating the ethical domain in the social domain rectifies this “failure.”

⁷⁸ Hofmeyr, “The Meta-physics of Foucault’s Ethics: Succeeding Where Levinas Fails,” 122.

historically-engaged activity: “the study of (modes of) problematization ... is thus the way to analyze questions of general import in their historically unique form.”⁷⁹ If we are to respond well to our problems, then we must have a relation to history, if only as a “set of almost negative conditions” in reference to which we learn how resist the limitations of the present.⁸⁰ Thus, as Foucault emphasizes, “a historical ontology of ourselves” will enable us to “separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think” and, therefore, create the space in which we might be, do, and think differently in response to our present and its historical conditions.⁸¹ Only with this relation to history, one that is displayed in Foucault’s work, can our becomings and transformations be operative and responsive ones.

Although Deleuze does not interrogate historical conditions to the significant and laborious extent that Foucault does, to the extent that his ethics involves problematization, it must also entail a response to history and the way history has shaped the present. Even if history is thought as a “set of almost negative conditions,” these negative conditions are those against which we create ourselves. If Deleuze eschews talk of history it is because too often history is thought as static, a set of givens or a series of facts, the states of affairs rather than the events that inspire those states of affairs; history appears as an answer to the question “what happened?” rather than a response that problematizes the events of the past. In this respect, Foucault’s approach to history is Deleuzian in its focus on contingent events.⁸² What we must mobilize in order to respond to this past state of affairs is the potential that invigorated them and animates our being, doing, or thinking otherwise in the future. Deleuzian problematization, thus, does not ignore history but simply focuses on the movement into future rather than the way that movement comes from its past.

Conclusion

By drawing together Foucault and Deleuze’s reflections on ethical activity and emphasizing the crucial role played by problematization, I sought to delineate a conception of ethics as responsive. Responsiveness, as elaborated above, is not to be understood simply as a way of resolving a dilemma or providing an answer to an ethical issue. Traditional forms of morality, which offer timeless rules, would serve us better if we sought simply to solve problems. Such forms of moral thinking are not particularly responsive to the two types of condition described above – ontological mobility and historical contingency – and, indeed, they are not required to be so; if traditional moral decision-making “responds” to anything it is to a principle or to the narrowly delimited features of the moral dilemma. Yet, in the absence of a transcendent foundation for ethics, we abandon a rule-oriented morality and the pretense of well-grounded absolutes for an ethics of immanent practice that emphasizes activities and modes of relation. In the context of the perpetually shifting ground of ontological freedom and the persistent mobility of power relations, the groundlessness of this basis and the contingency of the forms

⁷⁹ “Qu’est-ce que les Lumières?,” 1396; “What is Enlightenment?,” 318.

⁸⁰ *What is Philosophy?*, 106/111.

⁸¹ “Qu’est-ce que les Lumières?,” 1393; “What is Enlightenment?,” 315-316.

⁸² See Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald Bouchard (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 139-164.

of socio-historical life have the potential to undo and co-opt our modes of resistance. Thus, our ethical activity ought to endeavor to be responsive in (at least) two distinct ways: first, we must seek to act (and think) in ways that interrogate and reveal the nexus of practices surrounding a problem as well as the historical context in which it arose and emerged as a problem; we must determine the contours of the problem *itself* in a critical fashion. Second, we must respond to the underlying ambiguity of the freedom that makes our actions possible, recognizing and reckoning with the fact that the fluidity and reversibility of power relations does not itself ensure resistance.⁸³ Understood in this way, responsiveness can operate as a measure by which we gauge the ethical adequacy of our practices. As such, it is a normative demand that moves Deleuzo-Foucaultian ethics beyond the stipulations that we oppose normalization and keep open space for new ways of living, thinking, and feeling.

Problems, as we have seen, are conditions that demand response; they are those conditions that shape what will be possible. If we do not engage in the work of determining them and responding to them, answers and solutions of greater and lesser degrees of reflection will simply arise, directing and structuring what can be. In our responses, we have the potential to grasp a problem more fully, understanding whence it has come and what dangers lie within it. If the conditions of our existence and creation are problematic – in the sense of being persistently open, having the nature of a problem or question – then an ethics adequate to these conditions must be so as well. So, with Deleuze in the closing sentence of his book on Foucault, we can only hope and struggle to ensure that the new forms we invent “will not prove worse than” the previous ones.⁸⁴

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⁸³ De Beauvoir also reckons substantively with the implications of ambiguity for ethical and political action in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

⁸⁴ *Foucault* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1986), 141; *Foucault*, trans. Seán Hand (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 132.