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Askesis and Critique: Foucault and Benjamin

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ABSTRACT. While Foucault referred to Benjamin just once in his entire corpus, scholars have long noticed affinities between the two thinkers, mainly between their conceptions of history: their emphasis on discontinuity, their historiographical practices, and the role of archives in their work. This essay focuses, rather, on their practice of critique and, more specifically, on their conception of the relation of this practice to exercise or *askesis*. I examine the role of *askesis* as a self-transformative exercise in Foucault's late work and how this concept reverberates throughout his idea of critique as the exercise of an ethos demanding arduous work. Against this background, the role of exercise (*Übung*) in Benjamin's *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, his interest in ascetic kinds of exercise or schooling, and its ties to critique are discerned. This comparison reveals significant similarities in Foucault's and Benjamin's conception of philosophy, as well as different emphases in their inheritance of the Kantian critical project: critique as an exercise of an attitude attentive to possibilities for transformation in the present vs. critique as involving an attitude-transforming exercise; critique as a modern ethos that needs to be reactivated vs. critique as propaedeutic, as a preparation for a modern tradition.

Keywords: Michel Foucault, Walter Benjamin, Immanuel Kant, Pierre Hadot, Spiritual Exercise, Critical Theory

INTRODUCTION

Although Foucault referred to Benjamin just once in his entire corpus, and only in a footnote at that,¹ works such as Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* prove quite clearly the potential of juxtaposing these two thinkers, indicating the horizon this endeavor opens for a creative account of power, body and politics.² And yet, few scholarly comparisons of the

¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality 2: The Use of Pleasure* [1984] (1990), 8.

² See Giorgio Agamben's work: *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* [1995] (1998); *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* [1998] (1999); *State of Exception* [2003] (2005); *Sacrament of Language: An Archaeology of the Oath* [2008] (2011). Banu Bargu's *Starve and Immolate: The Politics of Human*

two have been conducted, and those that have tend to focus on affinities between their conceptions of history: their emphasis on discontinuity, their historiographical practices, and the role of archives in their work.³ This line of inquiry provides significant insights, bridging the gap between the Marxist messianism of Benjamin and the post-Marxist genealogical project of Foucault. Yet, I would argue that an alternate path of comparison, one that focuses on their practices of critique, is no less compelling. Indeed, it might offer a more nuanced comparison between the two, illuminating surprising affinities in their conception of philosophy as well as significant distinctions in the manners in which they inherit and transform the Kantian critical legacy. In this essay, I engage with this path by attending to the relation of critical practice to exercise, or *askesis*, in the thought of both Benjamin and Foucault.

The role of *askesis* as a self-transformative exercise in Foucault's late work is well known. It is a central concept in his ethics, owing much to Pierre Hadot's concept of spiritual exercise.⁴ Furthermore, this concept reverberates throughout Foucault's idea of critique as the exercise of an ethos demanding arduous work.⁵ At the same time, the role of exercise (*Übung*) in Benjamin's work and, more specifically, his interest in ascetic kinds of exercise or schooling are less known, and their relation to critique is disregarded. I do not intend to impose a full-fledged Foucauldian scheme onto Benjamin, which might result in effacing the uniqueness of the latter's thought. Rather, I aim to use a Foucauldian concept—or, more accurately, a relation between two concepts, *askesis* and critique—as a prism for an attentive and innovative reading of Benjamin, which will then lay the groundwork for a comparison between the two

Weapons (2014) is a further contemporary proof of the power of the juxtaposition of Foucault and Benjamin.

³ For a discussion focusing on the concept of historical discontinuity in Benjamin and Foucault, see: Daniele Lorenzini, "Benjamin/Foucault: Histoire, Discontinuité, Utopie," *Phantasia* 7 (2018), 1-10. For a discussion focusing on the concept of history and historical method, see Martin Rueff, "De Benjamin à Foucault : allumer la mèche," *Critique* 72:835 (2016), 1030-1048. For further comparison between the thinkers regarding their historical attitudes, see Stanley Aronowitz, "History as Disruption: On Benjamin and Foucault," *Humanities and Society* 2:2 (1979), 125-147. For a discussion on the normative accounts of political liberation that are motivated by distinctive theoretical perspectives on history and on the historian's task in both thinkers, see Aaron Greenberg, "Making Way for Tomorrow: Benjamin and Foucault on History and Freedom," *Journal of Political Thought* 2:1 (2016), 22-39. For a comparison that ties their historical thought to the contemporary museum, see Norton Batkin, "Conceptualizing the History of the Contemporary Museum: On Foucault and Benjamin," *Philosophical Topics* 25:1 (1997), 1-10. For a comparison of their approach to history and criticism of historicism that also refers to their reading in Nietzsche, see: Sigrid Weigel, *Body-and Image-Space: Re-Reading Walter Benjamin* (1996). For an "exception to the rule," in an essay that addresses ethics rather than history, see Julian Brigstocke, "Artistic Parrhesia and the Genealogy of Ethics in Foucault and Benjamin," *Theory, Culture & Society* 30:1 (2013), 57-78.

⁴ Arnold I. Davidson, "Ethics as Ascetics: Foucault, the History of Ethics, and Ancient Thought," in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault 1st ed.*, ed. Gary Gutting (1994), 121-129. For a more recent analysis highlighting the relation of this kind of ethics to Foucault's political project, see Daniele Lorenzini, *Éthique et politique de soi : Foucault, Hadot, Cavell et les techniques de l'ordinaire* (2015).

⁵ Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" [1984], in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984. Vol. 1: Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (1997), 319.

thinkers.⁶ Taking askesis and its relation to critique as a key to this comparison allows for a nuanced examination of the meaning assigned by both thinkers to exercises of self-transformation in the practice of critique. I begin by surveying Foucault's concept of askesis and the role it plays in the conception of philosophy in his late thought. I go on to trace the less familiar role played by similar transformative exercise in Benjamin. More specifically, I focus on Benjamin's foreword to his *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, where he writes of a particular kind of exercise related to the very form of philosophy and draws an explicit connection between the task of his book—presentation of the form of the baroque plays and the idea of Baroque—and ascetic schooling. This also illuminates the role of well-known Benjaminian practices such as *flânerie*. The last sections of the paper are dedicated to a comparison between Foucault's and Benjamin's inheritance of the Kantian critical project. The different emphases of the two thinkers in this respect are at times a matter of nuance—critique as an exercise of an attitude attentive to possibilities for transformation (Foucault) vs. critique as involving an attitude-transforming exercise (Benjamin). Yet at times they appear as a schism—critique as a modern ethos that needs to be reactivated without any obligation for doctrine or for teachings (Foucault) vs. critique as propaedeutic, as a preparation for the teachings of modern experience or for a modern tradition (Benjamin). In both cases, I argue, it is worth reflecting on whether the opposing poles are nevertheless implied by the other thinker.

ASKESIS AND THE CONCEPTION OF PHILOSOPHY IN FOUCAULT

What is philosophy today ... if it is not the critical work that thought brings to bear on itself? ... the endeavor to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently ... [I]t is entitled to explore what might be changed, in its own thought, through the practice of a knowledge that is foreign to it. The "essay" - which should be understood as the assay or test by which, in the game of truth, one undergoes changes ... - is the living substance of philosophy, at least if we assume that philosophy is still what it was in times past, i.e., an "askesis," an exercise of oneself in thought.⁷

In Foucault's introduction to *The Use of Pleasure*, his view of the role of exercise and the significance of the Greek term for it, askesis, is explicit: he claims it is the very substance of ancient philosophy and argues that it ought to be the substance of contemporary philosophy too—at least to the extent that it is critical. I will elaborate on Foucault's concept of critique in the penultimate section; for now, I note only that critical work appears here as a contemporary form of askesis.⁸ Significantly, such critical work is tied to exercise in the sense that it designates the mapping of possibilities for thinking differently, for changing thought, and for intervening in the "game of truth" by *practicing* a foreign form of knowledge. Foucault describes his own project in these terms: "It was a philosophical

⁶ In this sense, methodologically, this essay is closer to Lorenzini, whose article "Benjamin/Foucault" compares them through the relation between concepts such as attitude, history and present rather than to Brigstocke, who in "Artistic Parrhesia" experiments with reading Benjamin through the Foucauldian scheme of ethics.

⁷ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 2, 9.

⁸ Matthew Sharpe, "'Critique' as Technology of the Self," *Foucault Studies* 2 (2005), 101.

exercise. The object was to learn to what extent the effort to think one's own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently."⁹ The exercise Foucault undertakes is not merely one of exploring the ancient history of subjectivity, of past practices of subjectivation, in order to gain theoretical knowledge of ourselves; it is also one of practicing this knowledge so as to transform the way we think. For instance, in taking the explication of what is silent within us not merely as a form of knowing the self but rather as a form of care for the self, we attend to possibilities for self-transformation.

However, this very concrete example of Foucault's own work does not adequately explain why he sees askesis as so central to philosophy as it had once been and as it should be today. In order to address this question, I would like to outline three themes, mainly following the work of Arnold Davidson's work on Foucault's ethics, but with a significant addition of the political aspect: first, the origin of exercise and its textual embodiment in philosophy; second, the theme of exercise as a form of moral subjectivation and its political role; and third, the relation between exercise and access to truth. I will later demonstrate how some of these themes come into play in Benjamin as well, albeit in a different manner.

Foucault's use of the concept of spiritual exercise to describe his own work is indebted to the work of Pierre Hadot, the historian of ancient philosophy. Hadot offers a revolutionary way to understand ancient philosophy not as theory but as a way of life that requires training and exercise. This thesis was instigated by a philological problem for understanding the significance of well-known ancient texts, which scholars found repetitive, highly rhetorical, and lacking coherence. Among them were Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*, which were written daily, and which the author addressed to himself. Hadot claims this text was not another instance of the personal comments genre that was common at the time but in fact served as a spiritual exercise that aimed at mastering the various powers of the soul. By relinquishing the attempt to read the text as autobiographical or as presenting a philosophical system (theory), one can see it as a document of askesis: arduous work meant to affect the self, to transform one's ways of looking, willing, and judging.¹⁰

This was not only characteristic of stoics such as Aurelius, with their training in adopting a detached stance in face of worldly changes, evil, death, etc.; according to Hadot, spiritual exercises were fundamental to *all* the central philosophical schools of antiquity. Their texts were not written in order to communicate information but rather to affect the reader; they are not primarily propositional but formative, even transformative.¹¹ Witnessing the ongoing struggle between the interlocutors in Socratic dialogues, for instance, leads the readers to observe themselves—their beliefs, attitudes, and points of view—in a

⁹ *The History of Sexuality* 2, 9.

¹⁰ Arnold I. Davidson, "Pierre Hadot and the Spiritual Phenomenon of Ancient Philosophy," in *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* by Pierre Hadot, ed. Arnold I. Davidson (1995), 1-35.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 21-26.

manner that can be transformative. Indeed, according to Hadot, the goal of ancient philosophical discourse was the transformation of the lives of individuals, teaching them not a theory but a way of life. Hadot further claimed that while such exercises had been obscured by most modern philosophy, they have reemerged in various modern thinkers, such as Goethe and Nietzsche.¹²

Foucault was deeply influenced by Hadot's approach to ancient philosophy, and the idea of askesis became a pivotal motive in his exploration of the history of ethics in his last years. This leads us to our second theme. The Greco-Roman notion of askesis has to do with "constituting oneself" through certain kinds of exercise or, as Foucault puts it, "a practical training that was indispensable in order for an individual to form himself as a moral subject."¹³ This sense of the word does not focus on the common association of askesis with asceticism, namely, progressive practices of renunciation of the self and of reality aimed at gaining access to another level of reality. In Foucault's history of ethics, centering on the self's relation to itself rather than merely on the codes and rules the subject is to obey, the various forms of ancient askesis—including "abstinences, memorizations, self-examinations, meditations, silence... listening to others" and myriad forms of writing to oneself and to others—play a significant role.¹⁴ They exemplify the possibility for self-transformation not by "subjecting the subject to the law" but rather by "binding him to truth"¹⁵ or by transforming "truth into ethos,"¹⁶ a disposition or attitude: a way of being.

Yet, as Davidson suggests, askesis as part of "the self-forming activity or ethical work that one performs on oneself in order to transform oneself into an ethical subject" plays a major role not only in antiquity but also in Foucault's account of the present.¹⁷ Askesis is part of the "'technologies of the self': the ways in which we relate to ourselves, contribute to the forms in which our subjectivity is constituted and experienced, as well as to the forms in which we govern our thought and conduct."¹⁸ It contributes not only to an account of who we have become but also to the account of "how we might become different."¹⁹ It is thus a fundamental part of Foucault's conception of philosophy with which

¹² Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* [1987], ed. Arnold I. Davidson (1995), 147–78, 217–237.

¹³ *The History of Sexuality* 2, 77.

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, "Self-writing" in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984. Volume 1: Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (1997), 208.

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–1982*, ed. Frédéric Gros (2006), 317.

¹⁶ Foucault, "Self-writing," 209.

¹⁷ Davidson, "Ethics as Ascetics," 118. A significant example is Foucault's use of this concept in order to conceive the ethical potential of homosexuality in his days, as one of its goals is "to advance into a homosexual askesis that would make us work on ourselves and invent, I do not say discover, a manner of being that is still improbable." Michel Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life" [1981], in *Foucault Live (Interviews, 1966–84)*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (1989), 206, as cited in "Ethics as Ascetics," 125.

¹⁸ "Ethics as Ascetics," 119.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 135.

we began: philosophy as “the endeavor to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently.”²⁰

Before moving forward with Foucault’s appropriation of the idea of askesis, we should note Hadot’s critique of Foucault’s emphasis on subjectivity after the latter’s death. According to Hadot, in several of the major ancient schools (Platonism, Epicureanism and Stoicism), individual transformation is “obtained through a movement by which one passes from individual, passionate subjectivity to the objectivity of a universal perspective.”²¹ In other words, the issue at hand is not “the fashioning of a self ... but on the contrary ... a surpassing of the self, or at least ... an exercise by which the self is situated within this totality and experiences itself as one part thereof”;²² in other words, as belonging to a “cosmic whole.”²³ Likewise, Hadot sees ancient writing practices as liberating “oneself from one’s individuality, in order to raise oneself up to universality ... [allowing] its practitioner to accede to the universality of reason within the confines of space and time.”²⁴ Hadot thus claims that Foucault’s reading of ancient askesis avoids the themes of transcending the self, of universality and objectivity.²⁵ However, Orazio Irrera, who reconsiders the dialogue between the two thinkers, suggests that “the act that elevates the individual to a perspective that is within him but at the same time transcends him, so important for Hadot, remains for Foucault an act of self-reflection ... immanent to ... subjectivity itself.”²⁶ In other words, Irrera claims that these themes are not disregarded but are rather situated within the context of the subject’s relation to itself.

An additional difference between Foucault and Hadot lies in their distinct ethico-political projects. Hadot is interested in reactivating an ancient kind of ethics in the present that aims to liberate the modern moral person from selfish individuality and open her to universality and objectivity in practice. Foucault’s interest in the ancient practices, on the other hand, is part of his conception of ethics as a political practice of resistance in the present. As such, the work of the self on oneself is an element in the dynamics of the practice of subjectivation as counter-conduct in the face of mechanisms of subjugation. Foucault’s analysis of ancient techniques of the self thus aims to offer a toolbox to be used in creative manners in order to conduct oneself differently than one had in the past.²⁷

Moving on to the third theme pertinent to our question: the role askesis plays in Foucault’s account of the history of truth as a condition for accessing it. This comes up in Foucault’s distinction between philosophy and spirituality in the opening lecture of his 1982 course on the *Hermeneutics of the Subject*:

²⁰ *The History of Sexuality* 2, 9.

²¹ Pierre Hadot, *The Selected Writings of Pierre Hadot: Philosophy as Practice* [2002] (2020), 231.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 208.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 210-211.

²⁵ *Ibid.*; Hadot, *The Selected Writings of Pierre Hadot*, 230-231.

²⁶ Orazio Irrera, “Pleasure and transcendence of the self: Notes on ‘a dialogue too soon interrupted’ between Michel Foucault and Pierre Hadot,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 36:9 (2010), 1013.

²⁷ Lorenzini, *Éthique et politique de soi*, 11-14; 217-218; 223-241.

I think the modern age of the history of truth begins when knowledge itself and knowledge alone gives access to the truth. That is to say, it is when the philosopher (or the scientist, or simply someone who seeks the truth) can recognize the truth and have access to it in himself and solely through his activity of knowing, without anything else being demanded of him and without him having to change or alter his being as subject.²⁸

Foucault terms this moment, which assumes that knowledge provides the subject with access to truth, the Cartesian moment in the history of truth. In this approach, the sufficient conditions that enable such access include a requirement to follow certain methodological rules and meet certain extrinsic conditions, such as not being insane or not trying to deceive others. Yet none of these address the subject's mode of being. Foucault's history of ancient philosophy, however, reveals how, in that earlier period, access to truth had in fact been intimately involved with the transformation of the subject. If philosophy asks what allows the subject access to truth (e.g., cognitive faculties) and what the conditions and limits of this access are, in antiquity the answer to these questions involved spirituality:

We will call "spirituality" then the set of these researches, practices, and experiences, which may be purifications, ascetic exercises, renunciations, conversions of looking, modifications of existence, etc., which are, not for knowledge but for the subject, for the subject's very being, the price to be paid for access to the truth.²⁹

This model of spirituality assumes that the subject has no a priori access to truth. Neither a certain form of subjectivity nor cognitive faculties sufficiently provide in themselves such a path; access requires conversion and transformation through arduous work of the self on the self—through askesis. The Cartesian moment, on the other hand, effaces spirituality and, with it, the philosophical need for askesis.³⁰

While the distinction between philosophy and spirituality is Foucault's way of characterizing the Hellenistic moment that interests him, it also facilitates thinking about modern philosophical figures who defied the Cartesian moment. In his preface to Foucault's *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Davidson distinguishes Lacan and Wittgenstein, and even

²⁸ Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 17.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁰ It is important to mention that in his critique of Foucault's use of the idea of askesis, Hadot also rejects Foucault's historical delineation of the history of philosophy. According to Hadot, philosophy as spiritual exercise declined already in the Middle Ages, when spiritual exercises became an integral part of Christianity. Descartes' philosophy is thus not a negative turning point; in fact, Hadot claims that Descartes' *Meditations*, as the name of the book hints, should be seen as a spiritual exercise itself and his philosophy as a significant reemergence of that tradition. Hadot supposes that Foucault would contend such an interpretation of Descartes, but as Hadot's translators, Matthew Sharpe and Federico Testa note, Foucault was aware of this dimension in Descartes' philosophy. See: *The Selected Writings of Pierre Hadot*, 231-232, and translators note j in p. 232.

Foucault himself, as such cases.³¹ He claims that these thinkers tie together philosophy and spirituality by opening up a space “for exercises, techniques, tests, the transfiguring space of a different attitude, a new ethos.”³² Philosophy, according to Foucault, does not concern a mere acquisition of knowledge but rather a kind of pursuit that results in the “knower’s straying afield of himself.”³³ With that in mind, I turn to Benjamin in order to discuss the space of straying and transformation he aims to open up through his writing.

TWO MEANINGS OF EXERCISE IN BENJAMIN

Benjamin’s *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* is dedicated to the obscure baroque mourning plays, which, if considered at all in the German cultural tradition of his day, were seen as bad tragedies filled with an overabundance of allegories and never-ending drama. For Benjamin, however, affinities between the “spiritual constitution of the Baroque” and the expressionism of his own day, with its “brokenness and inner strife,”³⁴ turned these plays into an intriguing case—not merely due to their contemporary relevance but also due to the theoretical challenge they posed for the then-dominant Idealist and Neo-Kantian aesthetic approaches.

The mourning plays, like the period in which they were written, are rife with contradictions: religious devotion and sacrilege; absolute sovereignty and its dissolution; linguistic excess and the emptiness of language. If one wishes to recognize their meaning and truth, one cannot adopt what Benjamin terms an “idealist attitude” (*Haltung*), namely one that is disposed towards the whole in advance. This approach is doomed to fail since any attempt to classify these plays as part of an aesthetic system of knowledge by subsuming them under a unifying principle of genre inevitably diffuses the very tensions and contradictions that characterize the plays for the sake of their synthesis into a concept.³⁵ The problematic tendency towards synthesis exposes a much more general problem regarding truth and the role of philosophy, which Benjamin discusses in the beginning of the book’s dense Epistemo-Critical Foreword:

³¹ Arnold I. Davidson, introduction to *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-1982* by Michel Foucault, ed. Frédéric Gros (2006), xxv-xxviii.

³² *Ibid.* xxviii.

³³ *History of Sexuality 2*, 8. Following the political role of askesis mentioned above, it is worth noting that Foucault also attributes a contemporary political significance to spirituality. This comes up in an interview regarding the Iranian revolution: Michel Foucault and Sabina Vaccarino Bremner, “Political Spirituality as the Will for Alterity: An Interview with the *Nouvel Observateur*” [1979] *Critical Inquiry* 47:1 (2020), 121–34.

³⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* [1925] (2018), 35, 39.

³⁵ For further elaboration on this attitude and on the role of the tractatus in Benjamin, see: Ori Rotlevy, “Presentation as indirection, indirection as schooling: The two aspects of Benjamin’s scholastic method,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 50:4 (2017), 493-516.

If philosophy is to preserve the law of its form not as mediating guide to knowledge but as presentation of truth, then it is necessary to emphasize the practice [*Übung*] of this form, not however its anticipation within the system.³⁶

What Benjamin calls “the idealist attitude” involves a reductive approach to truth and philosophy which conceives truth as the correctness of knowledge, a correct way of looking at the world, of representing it, and conceives of philosophy as a guide for the acquisition of knowledge.³⁷ This attitude promises in advance that every piece of knowledge will have its place in a system that constitutes the scheme and end of the process of knowledge-acquisition. With such a system in place, nothing can interrupt the continuous progression of knowledge.

Benjamin, on the other hand, identifies with those moments or periods in the history of philosophy that approach truth as something beyond any specific representation, as something *unumschreiblich*, which means not only uncircumscribable but also something that cannot be described, defined, determined or paraphrased. Thus, truth cannot be represented; it can only be presented or exhibited.³⁸ In Wittgensteinian terms: truth cannot be told, but it can be shown.³⁹ I will elaborate on this later on, but what I would like to emphasize at this point is the relation Benjamin finds between the uncircumscribable character of truth and *Übung*, practice or exercise:

In all epochs in which the uncircumscribable [*unumschreiblich*] essentiality of the true has come into view, this practice [*Übung*] has imposed itself in the form of a propaedeutic which can be designated by the scholastic term “tractatus,” for this term contains a reference, however latent, to those objects of theology without which truth cannot be thought.⁴⁰

Scholasticism epitomizes the constant practice of presentation. The kind of objects it deals with, theological objects, cannot be simply represented; yet this does not lead scholasticism to silence but rather to a repetitious attempt to treat (*tractare*) them from endless directions. Benjamin famously describes the method of the tractatus—which inspires his own digressive form of writing—as *Umweg*: indirection or detour; a form of digression. “Presentation as indirection ... is the methodological character of the tractatus.”⁴¹

In scholastic tractates, various authoritative citations of opposing opinions on the theological matter at hand are brought forth and problematized. The point of this method is not to reconcile opposing views and consolidate them into a final resolution but rather to exhibit a truth that lies beyond any opinion and any representation of the matter. The

³⁶ Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, 2.

³⁷ Eli Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait* (2012), 12.

³⁸ *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, 1–2.

³⁹ For further comparison between Wittgenstein and Benjamin, see: Eli Friedlander, “Wittgenstein, Benjamin, and Pure Realism,” in *Wittgenstein and Modernism*, eds. Michael Lemahieu and Karen Zumhagen-Yekplé (2016).

⁴⁰ *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, 2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

arabesque, non-linear form of the tractatus is inherently linked to the impossibility of directly addressing truth: its presentation requires the practice of repetitious detours from any single direction in thought, be it that of an authority or that of the author. Thus, our initial understanding of *Übung* is as a repetitious practice of digression; one that is necessary for the presentation of truth; for the textual construction of this presentation.⁴²

Similarly, Benjamin describes his task in the book as the presentation of the *idea* of the *Trauerspiel*'s form: presentation, not representation. He aims to exhibit the disparate and opposing phenomena condensed in the plays and related to them in various manners as partaking in one meaningful context, an intellectual whole, a constellation, a panorama; and to do so without effacing the oppositions and without subsuming extremes under one concept. In Benjamin's textual construct, some six hundred citations interrupt the continuous course of thought and are themselves interrupted by excursive remarks. Through this form of writing—which persistently attempts to think that which cannot be subsumed under a unifying principle—myriad levels of meaning, relations, and affinities are manifested. The exercise he undertakes thus lies in realizing the potential laden in linguistic materials: a potential that goes beyond their "correctness," and has to do with realizing a mosaic-like image that comes together "out of the singular and disparate."⁴³

This idea of exercise in presentation as realizing or "actualizing" phenomena in the medium of language is worth emphasizing. In "On Language as such and on the Language of Man," Benjamin famously distinguishes between two linguistic spheres: the sphere of signs and that of names. The former commonly serves as means of communication through arbitrary means; the latter expresses essences, taking the Adamic recognition of the animals through the act of naming as its model.⁴⁴ This distinction remains intact throughout the substantial metamorphoses of Benjamin's conception of language, from its early and more mystical stage to its later, more materialist one. In the *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin links the act of naming to the task of philosophy as the presentation of truth or of ideas. Yet philosophy realizes its task by using the sphere of signs, designations, or

⁴² Interestingly, we find a seemingly similar point in Foucault: "There is irony in those efforts one makes to alter one's way of looking at things, to change the boundaries of what one knows and to venture out a ways from there. Did mine actually result in a different way of thinking? Perhaps at most they made it possible to go back through what I was already thinking, to think it differently, and to see what I had done from a new vantage point and in a clearer light. Sure of having traveled far, one finds that one is looking down on oneself from above. The journey rejuvenates things, and ages the relationship with oneself. I seem to have gained a better perspective on the way I worked – gropingly, and by means of different or successive fragments – on this project, whose goal is a history of truth" (*History of Sexuality* 2, 11). The similarity is the figure of going back to the same thing, groping, using fragments. However, the great difference is that, for Foucault, this brings a certain perspective in relation to himself, while in Benjamin, as we shall see, the main issue is a loosening of the self; making the self-less central, less imposing, in the intellectual work. The other difference is that Foucault speaks of the return to things as "rejuvenating" them. In Benjamin, however, this return is more of a mortification. See: *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, 182.

⁴³ *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, 3.

⁴⁴ Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" [1916], in *Selected Writings Vol. I: 1913-1926*, eds. Mark Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (1996), 62-74.

representations. In one of his last texts, he provides a relevant formula: philosophy (of language) seeks to “strike a spark” between “naming and designating.”⁴⁵ This is an apt depiction of the philosophical exercise: it uses representations of phenomena not as signs or designations for communication but rather for the exhibition of ideas. That is why Benjamin speaks of this act as “the salvation of phenomena.”⁴⁶ Their meaning is actualized in the presentation of ideas; without this exercise, there is no access to the sphere of ideas or to truth. We should also note that Benjamin refers to this as an “objective interpretation” of phenomena,⁴⁷ seeming to suggest a certain affinity to Hadot’s emphasis on objectivity and the transcendence of the subject. However, this is not the universal objectivity Hadot has in mind. Rather, resistance to the idealist conception of truth as correct representation, or as the proper synthesis of the subject, allows access here to a sphere of meaning which is otherwise blocked.

So far, I have presented what is by now a rather conventional understanding of Benjamin’s method of presentation,⁴⁸ and added the link to the exercise performed in the *Trauerspiel*; an exercise through which the image in the text is constructed and phenomena are salvaged and actualized. On its surface, this dimension of an “actualizing” exercise does not seem to share anything with Foucault’s transformative exercises. Moving beyond this, I would like to highlight another dimension of exercise in Benjamin’s work; one that is much closer to the latter and involves a transformation of the subject required in order to access truth.

As I noted previously, Benjamin criticizes the idealist attitude towards these plays. Yet at the same time he is critical of simply abandoning this attitude in favor of what he calls “an improvised immersion in details,”⁴⁹ claiming that this latter approach also fails to “make present” the meaning of the epoch in question. The profusion of contradictions in the plays leads to a sense of disorientation and has no chance of presenting the baroque phenomena as belonging to a single context or to one mentality (*Geistigkeit*).⁵⁰ In order to make present the meaning of the epoch, Benjamin claims that an alternative attitude is required—one that is neither idealist nor a mere abandonment of idealism but rather a product of schooling:

Only a mode of observation coming from afar and, indeed, initially capable of renouncing the prospect of totality can lead the spirit [*Geist*]*—*through an ascetic schooling, so to speak*—*to the fortitude that allows it, before the spectacle of that

⁴⁵ Walter Benjamin, “Review of Honigswald’s *Philosophie und Sprache*” [1939], in *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Marcus Bullock, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (2003), 141.

⁴⁶ *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, 24.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 34

⁴⁸ See: Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin*, 12; Hans-Jost Frey, “On presentation in Benjamin,” in *Walter Benjamin: Theoretical Questions*, ed. David S. Ferris (1996).

⁴⁹ *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, 39.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

panorama, to remain master of itself. It is the course of this schooling that had to be described here.⁵¹

Benjamin calls on us to reread his entire foreword as describing a course of schooling, namely, as presenting a process that develops spiritual habits and dispositions, and the kind of attitude to truth that is different from both the idealist one and its simplistic abandonment. This claim, I would argue, tends to be neglected by Benjamin scholarship. It assumes, against what Foucault terms the Cartesian moment, that the subject of knowledge does not have access to truth a priori. Moreover, a fundamental attitude of the Kantian-Idealist subject—its directionality toward a system, towards the kind of systematicity championed by the natural sciences—is precisely what blocks its access to truth. This attitude is neither adequate for recognizing the truth of the Baroque nor for recognizing the truth of the fragmented and contradictory modern experience of Benjamin's own time. He suggests, instead, that truth can only be accessed if the subject of his day—the modern subject—undergoes a process of spiritual transformation.

Consider again the writing-form of the scholastic tractate. It constitutes a space for the transformation of the subject. Just as in Hadot's account of ancient philosophical texts, the text itself is formative, indeed, even transformative. And, thus, we observe the double meaning of exercise. The digressive exercise is not merely the practice of presentation of truth; it is also an exercise that in itself has an effect on the author and the reader. In Benjamin's words, the tractate forces a form of writing that "with every sentence ... stops and starts anew," and, if successful, obliges the reader as well "to pause at stations of reflection."⁵² Exercise in Benjamin is found in each and every sentence, and between each and every sentence. Note his explicit emphasis on how the writing generates a certain practice, a very material practice of reading, thus generating certain habits in the reader. More specifically, the constant use of citations, interrupting the progression of thought, effects a "renunciation of the unbroken course of intention."⁵³

Like the scholastic tractate, the entire text of the *Trauerspiel*—not just its foreword—should be understood as a space of spiritual exercise in which the reader is able to renounce the continuous structure of intentionality; a structure that is necessarily the foundation for any reading that seeks a unifying principle in what it reads, be it the intention of the author, the principle of a genre, or any other instance of the attitude typical of an idealist subject. In other words, this is a text that not only exhibits truth but that exercises the readers in the transformative practice of moving away from an idealist attitude and towards an alternative one that allows being receptive to truth. The schooling it offers develops new habits countering the idealist ones. This kind of exercise in renouncing a fundamental structure of subjectivity demands self-mastery: an intense struggle against a basic predisposition towards a unifying principle in favor of a different kind of being. Or, as Benjamin describes thought in the tractatus: "In its persevering, thinking constantly

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 4.

⁵³ Ibid.

begins anew; with its sense of the circumstantial, it goes back to the thing itself. This continual breathing in and out is the form of existence most proper to contemplation."⁵⁴

There are further aspects in which exercise in indirection, in methodical erring, opens up the possibility of transforming basic facets of the Kantian or Idealist subject: its directness; its approach to time; its attentiveness to content. Yet here I limit myself to the following point: Benjamin asks us to read the foreword to the *Trauerspiel* as the description of a course in schooling, the transformation of attitude, disposition, and habits through exercise. Along with the exercise in presentation, this transformative exercise conditions access to truth. In this respect, focused attention to exercise/askesis reveals an affinity between Benjamin and Foucault that has hitherto been unnoticed.

Furthermore, while the *Trauerspiel* has no explicit political context, when inspected through the prism of askesis, it seems that Benjamin is quite close to the political context in which Foucault situates the concept in modernity. The adoption of the form of the scholastic treatise and its digressive method—an exercise in the transformation of the self as essential for access to truth—can be understood as resistance to the neo-Kantian academic regime of Benjamin's time; a practice of subjectivation that resists the mechanisms of subjugation or, maybe more fittingly, the regime of truth.

The comparison to Foucault invites us to further contemplate the political context of exercise in Benjamin. I have discussed just one example of transformative exercise in Benjamin. It is the most philosophically informed one and is valuable in that it is an exercise that inspires a transformation in writing, reading, thinking, and being. But other examples abound in Benjamin's corpus: writing practices he adopted, such as following the rule "Never use the word 'I' except in letters";⁵⁵ experiments in drug intoxication and their documentation; and, most notably, the practice of *flânerie*, that modern urban exercise in digression or wandering, which Benjamin practiced not just in his walks through cities but also in his writing about them.⁵⁶ Elaborating on each one of these would take us too far afield, but a few brief notes will assist in considering the political context of exercise in Benjamin's thought.

We find reference to the two latter examples, concerning experimentation with intoxication and *flânerie*, in Benjamin's essay on Surrealism. I consider these two iterations of transformative exercise under the term "the loosening of the self" or of the ego [Das "Lockerung des Ich"], which he himself uses in the essay.⁵⁷ Each case, be it the use of hashish or methodically losing oneself in a city, is an exercise in making the self less

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Walter Benjamin, "Berlin Chronicle" [1931], in *Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2: 1931-1934*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (1999), 603.

⁵⁶ See Walter Benjamin, *On Hashish* [1927-1934], ed. Howard Eiland (2006). See also: Benjamin, "The Return of the *Flâneur*" [1929], in *Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 1: 1927-1930*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (1999), 262-67. A significant philosophical understanding of these practices can be found in Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (1998), 117-148.

⁵⁷ Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism" [1929], in *Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 1: 1927-1930*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (1999), 208.

central, less stable, less fundamental in practice or in experience. When Benjamin refers to a “loosening of the self,” he describes the surrealist use of dreamy, intoxicating experiences in order “to step outside the charmed space of intoxication.”⁵⁸ In other words, a deployment of intoxication for the sake of awakening. The development of an awakened collective consciousness to the everyday reality of capitalism is central to this essay and to Benjamin's Marxist thought at large. But what this essay emphasizes more than any other text is that this collective awakening is brought about by exercises in self transformation and pertains not only to the surrealists but to the practices of “the reader, the thinker, the loiterer, the *flâneur*”; to Benjamin's own practices.⁵⁹

The term “loosening of the self” brings us much closer to the Christian renunciation of the self than most of Foucault's examples for self-transformation, yet it is not identical to it; the practice is not one of self-denial, and it is not aimed at entering a divine kingdom. Instead, Benjamin's “Surrealism” suggests that these exercises are instrumental in releasing revolutionary energies from the past, and specifically from outdated objects,⁶⁰ and in allowing access to a collective sphere. The first point is close to what we saw in the *Trauerspiel*. Similarly to how the idealist attitude denies access to the meaning of the neglected Baroque plays, in the *Surrealism* essay, bourgeois consciousness maintains the past at a safe distance, as a static object, blocking the dynamic energies laden in it. Exercise in loosening the self conditions the release of these energies. At the same time, this exercise in self-transformation receives an explicitly political context as it allows initiation to a space in which a collective body can be produced.⁶¹ It is thus neither an attempt for self-constitution as in Foucault nor an attempt to reach a universal perspective as in Hadot. The exercise that liberates from the structure of bourgeois subjectivity simultaneously paves the way for the epistemic recognition of energies in the past, the production of a collective, and for collective awakening.

Foucault did not share Benjamin's revolutionary attitude,⁶² and he was explicitly against a politics of awakening.⁶³ Does this mean that he is close to the early Benjamin of the *Trauerspiel* and distant from the late Marxist one? Not exactly. The two Benjamins are actually closer than they might seem. While the theme of awakening is characteristic of late Benjamin, the collective aspect of exercise can be discerned not only in texts with a clear Marxist tone but also, more implicitly, in the *Trauerspiel*. This theme appears not just in the affinity between the renunciation of intentionality, a central structure of subjectivity, and the loosening of the self. Rather, as we shall see, it can also be discerned in the liberation from a subject-object structure, which serves to present the teachings of modern

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 216.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 210.

⁶¹ Ibid, 217-218.

⁶² See Lorenzini's “Benjamin/Foucault,” for an opposition between Benjamin's messianic-revolutionary attitude and Foucault's critical-experimental one.

⁶³ Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, “Intellectuals and Power [1972]” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (1977), 208.

experience as a shared meaningful experience. In order to recognize this, we will need to consider Benjamin's Kantian legacy, the form in which he inherits critique, and its relation to exercise. This inquiry will also allow us a more nuanced comparison between Benjamin and Foucault in the conclusion concerning the place of collectivity in their critical work.

CRITIQUE'S PROPAEDEUTIC ROLE: BENJAMIN'S KANTIAN HERITAGE AND THE TWOFOLD EXERCISE

Kant's influence on Benjamin is a matter of debate in the Benjamin scholarship. In his "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy," Benjamin explicitly conceived why and how Kantian philosophy ought to be transformed in his own present. However, the extent to which he realized elements of this program in later stages of his thought, such as the *Trauerspiel* or the *Arcades Project*, is disputed. Howard Caygill suggests that "the 'recasting' of Kant's concept of experience anticipated in 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy' opened the vista of a philosophizing beyond philosophy."⁶⁴ Eli Friedlander, on the other hand, argues for a more direct inheritance that allows the discernment of significant elements of the "Program" in the *Trauerspiel*.⁶⁵ I continue this line of thought here with a brief sketch of parts of Benjamin's "Program" and their implications on reading the *Trauerspiel* as part of Benjamin's new form of critical philosophy.

One of the salient features of Benjamin's Kantian inheritance is the preparatory role of critique. Critical philosophy, according to the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* and to the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, "lays the foundation" or ground for doctrinal (*doktrinale*) philosophy, consisting of a doctrine of nature (*Naturlehre*) and a doctrine of morals (*Sittenlehre*). In this sense, it has a propaedeutic function.⁶⁶ The *Critique of Pure Reason* prepares the ground for the doctrinal philosophy of the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, and the later critiques prepare the ground for *The Metaphysics of Morals*. This is how Kant's corpus embodies the aim of critique "to make possible a metaphysics that has finally become a science."⁶⁷ It prepares the ground for doctrinal philosophy; in the words of Eli Friedlander, "for Kant, doctrine is that part of philosophy that can be transmitted and forms the basis of a tradition that can be passed from one generation to the next."⁶⁸ It is worth noting that this tradition is a progressive one. By examining the boundaries of knowledge and experience, Kantian critique dissolves metaphysics as a battleground between systems and thus enables scientific progress in this field that is based on stable teachings. We find this preparatory function albeit in a different, less scientific articulation

⁶⁴ Caygill, *The Colour of Experience*, 119.

⁶⁵ Walter Benjamin, 32. Other discussions focus on Benjamin's significant relation to the Neo-Kantian thought of his time: Peter Fenves, *Messianic Reduction* (2011); Tamara Tagliacozzo, *Experience and Infinite Task: Knowledge, Language and Messianism in the Philosophy of Walter Benjamin* (2017).

⁶⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* [1790] (2000), 58, 5:170; and Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals* [1797] (1991), 43-47, 4:387-391.

⁶⁷ Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 316.

⁶⁸ Walter Benjamin, 32.

in Benjamin: critique as propaedeutic to doctrinal philosophy does not entail scientific doctrine but rather more generally the transformation of philosophy to teachings.⁶⁹ More specifically, critique, according to Benjamin, enables experience in its totality to be teachable or transmissible. However, Benjamin historicizes this kind of propaedeutic in a manner that detaches it from science and progression.⁷⁰

Indeed, this is the most significant difference between Kant and Benjamin: the latter historicizes experience and correspondingly historicizes critique. For Kant, critique is a one-time project: one that opens up the possibility of doctrinal philosophy by providing well-justified grounds for turning experience in its totality once and for all into something teachable or transmissible. For Benjamin, experience in its very structure is temporal, ephemeral, historical. Kant, according to Benjamin, does not account for experience in general but rather for what was championed as experience in his time, based on the principles of the natural sciences. Yet this is not the only experience possible. The crises around WWI in representation, in politics, in the transmission of experience, and in what one might hope for could not be accounted for by a dull conception of experience such as the Kantian one; a conception that does not include the aspects of language and religion.⁷¹ The same applies to the experience of certain periods before the Enlightenment, such as the Baroque.⁷² This calls for thinking of experience historically, beyond its Kantian conception. This historicization of experience in turn calls upon the task of critique anew. The problem of the teachability or transmissibility of experience needs to be tackled yet again, for Kant coped with it only concerning the experience celebrated in his times. Thus, critique needs to be reactivated.

This does not make Kant irrelevant, according to Benjamin. Indeed, the very crisis of experience in Benjamin's times is what turns the Kantian task of making experience teachable, or showing it as transmissible, into such an acute one for Benjamin's generation. It allows the recognition of a collective consciousness sharing modern experience as meaningful. In his "Program," Benjamin claims that realizing this task demands not just a different concept of experience but also a different concept of knowledge; one that is not based on the subject-object relations around which Kantian experience and knowledge revolve. The conceptual work of transforming the central Kantian concepts is the critique required, in this early stage of Benjamin's thought, as a propaedeutic for a doctrine of modern experience.⁷³

While Kant is never mentioned by name in the foreword to the *Trauerspiel*, the text has been read as operating with a Kantian typology of philosophy.⁷⁴ Indeed, the title of the

⁶⁹ Walter Benjamin, "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy" [1918], in *Selected Writings Vol. I: 1913-1926*, eds. Mark Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (1996), 100-110.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid. 100-102.

⁷² Walter Benjamin, "On Perception" [1917] in *Selected Writings Volume 1: 1913-1926*, eds. Mark Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (1996), 93-96.

⁷³ Walter Benjamin, "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy," 100-110.

⁷⁴ *Walter Benjamin*, 32.

foreword (“epistemo-critical”), the reference to doctrine as the ultimate form of philosophy in its first section, and the articulation of a concept of truth as a form of recognition that differs from a Kantian concept of knowledge all support this reading. Similarly, its final section, with its image of the totality of the baroque experience as discussed previously, also suggests this. The promise of a panoramic picture of a totality, in which the contradictory details of a certain period are imbued with meaning, can be read as a promise for a doctrine of a rich modern experience; of making this kind of experience teachable, or transmissible. Yet, in contrast to Benjamin’s earlier stage, the presentation of such a panorama demands more than merely conceptual transformation. It requires arduous work both in the exercise of actualizing the past and in transforming the subject. The digressive exercise we observe in every page of the book is part of the construction of the fragmented modern experience as transmissible or, in other words, as being a part of a modern tradition.

It is worth noting that, in spite of Benjamin’s familiar later discussions of the crisis of tradition and transmissibility in modernity, tradition still has a constructive and even revolutionary role in his writings.⁷⁵ This is not a progressive tradition, as in Kant, but if one thinks of the *Trauerspiel* in light of the central role tradition plays in Benjamin’s entire oeuvre, and in relation to his use of the concept of teachings in its foreword, one finds that it provides a transformed image of Western cultural heritage: an image that situates the peripheral, fragmented, antithetical baroque plays as an organizing pattern, or origin, of modern experience with all its contradictory manifestations. This fits well with Benjamin’s own practice of critique as presenting such an origin, or idea, in the *Trauerspiel*, or an “Urphenomenon” in his *Arcades Project*.⁷⁶ The presentation of modernity’s fragmented past is thus the key for transmitting its experience as meaningful in the present.

However, as already implied, there is yet a second, complementary aspect of Benjamin’s concept of critique that has to do with the way in which he regards his foreword as describing a course of schooling. In order to prepare the ground for a modern tradition based on the discontinuous fragments of its past, critique needs not just to provide new concepts, or to arrange these fragments (the first dimension of exercise), but also to establish a space for transformation of the subject; for such a transformation (the second dimension of exercise) is required for the reception of this kind of tradition rather than the progressive continuous tradition Kant envisioned for scientific metaphysics. The practice of digression is an example of such an exercise that breaks the continuous structure of the subject’s intentionality; a structure that obstructs the possibility of constructing an alternative to the progressive tradition and is based on fragments and their linguistic

⁷⁵ There are various works that exemplify the fruitfulness of Benjamin’s concept of tradition beyond his discussion of its crisis in modernity. See for example: Vivian Liska, *German-Jewish Thought and Its Afterlife* (2017); John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (1993); Ori Rotlevy, “Critique in a Postsecular Age: Making Room for Tradition as a Medium”, *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 19:3 (2020), 436-452; Philippe Simay, “Reconstruire la tradition : l’anthropologie philosophique de Walter Benjamin,” in *Walter Benjamin: la tradition des vaincus*, ed. Philippe Simay (2008), 87-98.

⁷⁶ On the concept of *Urphenomenon* see: Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* [1982] (1999), 460, 462.

actualization. It is through such multifaceted exercise that critique prepares the ground for the transmission of modern experience as meaningful for a collective in Benjamin's present.

ASKESIS AND CRITIQUE: FOUCAULT'S KANTIAN HERITAGE

We began our discussion of Foucault by noting that he conceives of critical work as a contemporary form of askesis, "an exercise of oneself in thought."⁷⁷ We are now in a position to elaborate on this connection between critique and exercise. This will also provide us with an axis for comparing Benjamin's and Foucault's divergent ways of inheriting the Kantian legacy of critique.

Since Foucault's death, his Kantian heritage has been a topic of intense debate.⁷⁸ A decade ago, Colin Koopman described the spectrum of the debate as one spanning from a denial of this heritage altogether, through an approach that takes Foucault's archaeology as a form of transcendental critique, to an emphasis on genealogy as a non-transcendental form of critique more akin to Kant's anthropology than to his three Critiques.⁷⁹ More recently, we find works that add Foucault's ethics to the discussion of the Kantian heritage.⁸⁰ Accessing Foucault's Kantian legacy through the prism of askesis and its connection to critique follows this lead. However, my aim here is not to encompass the entire issue of Foucault's Kantian heritage in the various aspects of his work but only to present this connection as a fruitful way to compare Foucault's and Benjamin's acts of inheritance. I thus focus mainly on the text by Foucault in which this tie is most explicit: "What is Enlightenment?"

Foucault's well-known innovation in "What is Enlightenment?" is his conception of critique as a modern attitude attentive to the present and to the possibilities for self-transformation that this entails. In his interpretation of Kant's "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" Foucault famously highlights the place of *Ausgang*,⁸¹ a "way out," in Kant's definition of Enlightenment: a way out of a state of self-incurred minority

⁷⁷ *The History of Sexuality* 2, 9.

⁷⁸ For examples of early interventions in this debate, see: Colin Gordon, "Question, Ethos, Event: Foucault on Kant and Enlightenment," *Economy and Society* 15:1 (1986), 71–87; Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, "What is Maturity? Habermas and Foucault on 'What is Enlightenment?'," in *Foucault, a Critical Reader*, ed. David Couzens Hoy (1986); Jürgen Habermas, "Taking Aim at the Heart of the Present: On Foucault's Lecture on Kant's 'What is Enlightenment?'" in Jürgen Habermas, *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate*, ed. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (1989); James Schmidt and Thomas E. Wartenberg, "Foucault's Enlightenment: Critique, Revolution, and the Fashioning of the Self," in *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*, ed. Michael Kelly (1994).

⁷⁹ Colin Koopman, "Historical Critique or Transcendental Critique in Foucault: Two Kantian Lineages," *Foucault Studies* 8 (2010), 100–121.

⁸⁰ See Sharpe, "'Critique as Technology of the Self,'" 97–116; *Éthique et politique de soi*, 265–271; Sabina F. Vaccarino Bremner, "Anthropology as Critique: Foucault, Kant and the Metacritical Tradition," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 28:2 (2020), 336–358. Significantly, these studies tie ethics, archaeology, and genealogy together.

⁸¹ Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" 305.

in which our thoughts and actions are directed by others, and we are not autonomous free beings. Kant, looking for the difference in his “today,” turns his present moment in history into one that offers such a way out; an opportunity for changing that state and an opportunity for human transformation. Moreover, he finds in this reflection a motive for his particular philosophical task.⁸² Kantian critique, by defining the conditions of the legitimate use of reason in knowing, acting, and hoping, points out the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking as minors.

Foucault adopts Kant’s attitude towards the present as a moment of opportunity and towards ourselves as being apt for transformation in the conditions of the present. Yet he also emphasizes that this attitude needs to be “permanently reactivated,” exercised in each and every present anew, as a philosophical ethos to live by.⁸³ Critique here is related to askesis in two ways: first, explicitly to asceticism, to the challenge of self-transformation, or “self-production,” echoing Hadot’s reading of ancient philosophy with the Foucauldian emphasis on subjectivity.⁸⁴ Second, critique is related to askesis more generally as exercise, for Foucault speaks of a reactivation of the critical attitude, of its practice in the present. Critique as attitude requires exercise for pointing out anew the possibilities for self-transformation. While this idea echoes the askesis of antiquity, it is also the exercise of a modern ethos, one that attends to the subject each time in the specific present in which it is situated, pointing out the historical contingency of its limits as well as the possibility for crossing over; for constituting ourselves anew as subjects.

Whereas Foucault adopts the reflection of the present moment as an opportunity for self-transformation and as a motive for philosophical work from Kant, the emphasis on reactivation highlights what he does not take from Kant: doctrine. “The thread which may connect us with the Enlightenment is *not faithfulness to doctrinal elements but, rather, the permanent reactivation of an attitude* – that is, of a philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era.”⁸⁵ Foucault does not accept the ideal of freedom Kant articulates through his Critiques. The transformation of our selves is not, according to Foucault, tethered in advance to a doctrinal element such as that which the Enlightenment conceived of as a free being. Foucauldian critique thus seeks to give new impetus to “the undefined work of freedom”; it seeks to point out, in the present, through genealogical research, “the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think.”⁸⁶ In this sense, the exercise of critique demands arduous work on ourselves each time anew.

A note on Foucault’s “What is Critique?,” with its clear political emphasis, is helpful for understanding this resistance to (Kantian) doctrine. In this text, Foucault ties critique to the question “how not to be governed like this,”⁸⁷ and the critical attitude to an ethos

⁸² Ibid., 309.

⁸³ Ibid., 312.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 311-312.

⁸⁵ “What is Enlightenment?” 312, my italics.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 315.

⁸⁷ Michel Foucault, “What is Critique?” in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (2007), 41-81.

“defined by the ‘will not to be governed’ quite so much.”⁸⁸ Thus, “the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think” takes a clear political accent, as critique aims at the “desubjugation of the subject in the context of ... the politics of truth,”⁸⁹ namely, it aims at resistance to different regimes of truth. This ties the well-known aspect of Foucault’s genealogical projects, that of an account of “normalising or subjugating power/knowledge mechanisms,” to moments of “critical attitudes or ‘counter-conducts’” found in these projects, and thus to his interest in practices of self-production.⁹⁰ This coupling is apparent in the conclusion of “What is Enlightenment?”:

The critical ontology of ourselves must be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it must be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time *the historical analysis of the limits imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.*⁹¹

Thus, one of the fundamental differences between Foucault and Kant is that, for the latter, critique has a preparatory role, while the former resists this preparatory nature of critique altogether in favor of a characterization of critique as attitude;⁹² Foucault emphasizes the perpetual reactivation of an attitude rather than a continuation of doctrine or the production of any new scientific, universal doctrine or theory. And this is precisely where Foucault and Benjamin differ in how they inherit Kant. While in both thinkers critique needs to be reactivated time and time again, in Benjamin this reactivation is in favor of a modern doctrine of experience or tradition.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, in contrast to the common scholarly focus on the conception of history and historical practices in most comparisons between Foucault and Benjamin, I delve into the concept of askesis and its ties to critique. In Foucault, this tie is more central and thematized than in Benjamin. Nevertheless, as a prism for comparison, it leads us to substantial affinities in their conceptions of philosophy. Both attribute a significant role in philosophy to askesis, or exercise, by understanding it as a transformation of the self and of thought as well as a condition for accessing truth. Moreover, the tie between askesis and critique reveals a noteworthy affinity in their conception of critique as practice; not merely because critique needs to be exercised, to be reactivated in the present, but also since it intervenes in the ethico-political realm by transforming the subject rather than by grounding, commanding or recommending what to do.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 67, as cited in Daniele Lorenzini, “On Possibilising Genealogy,” *Inquiry* (2020), 8.

⁸⁹ Foucault, “What is Critique?” 48, as cited in Lorenzini, “On Possibilising Genealogy,” 8.

⁹⁰ “On Possibilising Genealogy,” 9.

⁹¹ “What is Enlightenment?” 319, my italics.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 309–12.

While Foucault provides us with the main theoretical armature for holding critique and askesis together, the tie we find in Benjamin between exercise and ascetic schooling provides an important key for understanding the practicality of critique. In Benjamin, exercising critique means resisting a dominant attitude (the idealist one) and its habits of thought through the development of alternative habits. In other words, the issue at hand is not just the exercising of an attitude attentive to the possibilities for transformation in the present but also, and perhaps primarily, the exercising of a specific transformation of an attitude in the present. Critique involves both a process of unlearning and of schooling. In Foucault, the attempt to give primacy to care for the self over knowing thyself, against our modern habits, exemplifies this.

This is not to say that their understanding of askesis is identical. Foucault elaborates a history of askesis with a large variety of self-transformations. My reading of Benjamin adds him as a further example of such askesis. Yet, it is an example that is closer to Christian asceticism than most of Foucault's examples, both in its focus on loosening the self and on how exercise in presentation allows access to a higher (linguistic) sphere. Indeed, in Benjamin the transformative exercise conditioning access to truth is no less an exercise in the presentation of truth; in the actualization of past phenomena in the medium of language. In Foucault we find neither this metaphysics of actualization nor, more generally, the meaning of exercise as presentation (even if we noted in the margins a related affinity in their digressive approach to materials).

Additionally, this study discerns a significant difference in the Kantian heritage of the two thinkers, specifically in the propaedeutic role of critique. Foucault is very clear in his resistance to the conception of critique as preparing for doctrine. The teachings of critique are practical; a modern ethos that is sensitive to possibilities for transformation in the present. Benjamin, on the other hand, regards critique as preparing for the teachings of modern experience or, at least, for a modern, fragmented, discontinuous tradition.⁹³ It does so in a twofold manner: by changing certain structures of subjectivity and thus allowing the reader to enter a collective space and by constructing the modern past as transmitted to a potential collective in that space. The transformation he envisages is both in the form of the subject and in the configuration of historical content.

Hadot raises the problem of the relation between subjectivity and universality in Foucault's discussion of askesis; the comparison with Benjamin raises the problem of the relation to collectivity. Apparently, Foucault's focus is on the self and its relation to power. Yet, Benjamin allows us to ask, with and against Foucault, about the extent to which this focus actually prepares the way for collectivity. Foucault does not share Benjamin's revolutionary-messianic attitude, which turns collective awakening to the telos of critique. Yet, in certain moments, such as his understanding of the Iranian Revolution, he connects

⁹³ For a more detailed account of Benjamin's concept of a discontinuous tradition and its relation to critique, see Ori Rotlevy, "Critique in a Postsecular Age", and Ori Rotlevy, "'The Enormous Freedom of the Breaking Wave': Benjamin's Experience of Tradition Critique between Kant and the Talmud," *New German Critique* 140:2 (2020), 191-216.

spirituality (and thus, askesis) and collectivity.⁹⁴ Indeed, if critique is a form of askesis, we might ask whether the Foucauldian experiment of “going beyond the limits imposed on us” includes certain forms of collectivity. We might go a step further, following our comparison with Benjamin, and attempt to tie askesis, critique and tradition together in Foucault. Then, the problem of collectivity would not concern merely the possibilities opened up by “renouncing [one's] subject position”⁹⁵ but also by the critical transformation of history. It might be considered as a problem of thinking of “our critical ontology” as including discontinuous traditions both for resisting individuals and for possible ‘we’s of resistance.^{96 97}

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⁹⁴ Laura Cremonesi, Orazio Irrera, Daniele Lorenzini and Martina Tazzioli, "Foucault, the Iranian Uprising and the Constitution of a Collective Subjectivity," in *Foucault and the Making of Subjects*, ed. Laura Cremonesi, Orazio Irrera, Daniele Lorenzini and Martina Tazzioli (2016).

⁹⁵ Foucault and Vaccarino Bremner, "Political Spirituality", 124.

⁹⁶ I take the term ‘we’s of resistance from Lorenzini, “On Possibilising Genealogy”, where we find a line of thought similar to my own. For him, the question is whether we understand genealogy as merely “problem-izing” our present, or as “possibilising” various ‘we’s of resistance in the present and normatively binding them to resisting certain forms of power/knowledge: “Foucauldian genealogy is ‘normatively significant’: by recounting a history that is still ours (a history not only of subjection, but also of contestation and resistance), it situates each of us within a (multiplicity of) ‘we’(s), each carrying with it...a political commitment to fight against a specific power/knowledge apparatus. This is the (sui generis) normative force that possibilising genealogy possesses...thanks to its possibilising dimension, it possesses the normative force that derives from the constitution of a concrete framework for action (a political ‘we’) that allows genealogy itself to answer the question ‘Why resist?’ by generating a sense of political commitment in its readers.” (p. 16) The comparison with Benjamin suggests thinking about this “possibilising” function in terms of the propaedeutic role of critique. The concept of tradition adds a more general idea of normative obligation for transmitting a certain past. I believe the use of tradition is helpful, for instance, in reading Foucault’s “Enlightenment” essay and “What is Critique?”, where there is a contemporary obligation for explicating and thus transmitting the critical ethos. But following Benjamin, we might think more generally of late Foucault as handing down a tradition encompassing the various fragments he ties together, including the history of subjugation and of subjectification, which includes not only modern critical practices but also ancient practices of care for self and contemporary sexual practices to which he refers in his interviews (e.g., Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life”).

⁹⁷ The author wishes to thank the participants of the colloquium of The Program in Critical Theory at UC Berkeley, Gilad Sharvit and Naveh Frumer for their comments on a previous version of this paper, the anonymous reviewers and the editors of Foucault Studies for insightful suggestions, and Omri Shlomov Milson, Jenia Litovchik and Tali Friedman for their assistance in preparing the essay for publication.

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