

## Critique and virtue as formation of the subject: Judith Butler as a reader of Michel Foucault<sup>1 2 3</sup>

### *Crítica e virtude como autoformação do sujeito: Judith Butler como leitora de Michel Foucault*

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#### Abstract

Judith Butler productively explores the broadening of the spectrum of Foucault's concept of "critique". The nexus between critique and formation and between self-critique and self-education permeates the arguments of the two authors. Still, Butler indicates how much critique itself as virtue, discussed by Foucault, needs the formative dimension to be able to clarify in a post-foundationalist theoretical context of non-prescriptive normativity. This article intends to show that, with this step, Butler's reconstruction of the problem reaches a new level, both clarifying the meaning of self-formation of the subject and more accurately indicating the new meaning assumed by the Foucauldian notion of "critique" as virtue.

**Keywords:** critique, Virtue, Self-formation, Normativity

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## **Resumo**

*Judith Butler explora produtivamente a ampliação do espectro do conceito de “crítica” em Foucault. O nexó entre crítica e formação e entre autocrítica e autoformação permeia a argumentação dos dois autores, mas Butler indica o quanto a própria crítica como virtude, tematizada por Foucault, precisa da dimensão formativa para poder esclarecer a si mesma num contexto teórico pós-fundacionalista e de normatividade não prescritiva. Pretende-se mostrar que, com esse passo, a reconstrução do problema feita por Butler alcança novo patamar, tanto clareando o significado de autoformação do sujeito quanto indicando, com maior precisão, o novo sentido assumido pela noção foucaultiana de “crítica” como virtude.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Crítica, Virtude, Autoformação, Normatividade*

“what, therefore, am I,” I who belong to this humanity, perhaps to this piece of it, at this point in time, at this instant of humanity which is subjected to the power of truth in general and truths in particular? (Foucault, 2007, p 22).

But if that selfforming is done in disobedience to the principles by which one is formed, then virtue becomes the practice by which the self forms itself in desubjugation (Butler, 2013, p. 178).

Knowing what is critical and what constitutes a critical attitude towards the self and the world has been a constant concern of the dialogue between philosophy and education, marking the long Western philosophical-pedagogical tradition since its origin. Therefore, the critical attitude, in its original sense, is related to the human capacity of astonishment before reality, seeking to make it different from what it is or appears to be. The connections between individual and society, subject and world, and the way society and world interfere in the constitution of the subject represent the basic theme of reflection on human ethical-formative processes. In this context, the questioning of the place of self-government as a condition of the government of others and, consequently, the ethical-political problematization of what it means to govern oneself and in what sense the subject can achieve such a condition of being able to govern oneself, has become central to educational philosophy, in its best-known classical versions, such as Greek Paideia, Latin Humanitas, and German Bildung. That is, in Western culture, at least

since Platonic Socrates and his intense ethical-formative dialogue with Alcibiades, the problem of political action in the public sphere has its roots in the indispensable exercise of self-critique of the subject if one wants to *govern others well*. Now, since this original “Socratic moment,” critical thinking has to do with self-critique, that is, with the critical scrutiny of the subject to oneself, in order to be able to *govern others well*.<sup>4</sup>

However, in the development of Western democracies and, mainly, by the expansion in recent decades of far-right authoritarian conservatism, the critical attitude, both in the Socratic sense and in the sense of the modern *Aufklärung*, was progressively weakened, increasingly losing its importance to think about human culture in its most different expressions. The force currently exerted by authoritarian conservatism and by the socioeconomic logic of performance and competition imposes the naturalization of the processes of human and social subjection, giving rise to the intellectual need to problematize both the meaning and the exercise of the critical attitude. More precisely, it is a matter of thematizing what the critical attitude means to think about the ethical formation of the subject from the perspective of self-government.

Among the contemporary authors most attentive to this theme, Michel Foucault and Judith Butler should be highlighted, especially for the provocative way in which both seek to re-update the notion of “critique” and for the interesting clues they provide for the ethical exercise of the “critical” attitude. Also, we find in these two authors some conceptual references that allow us to think, from an ethical-formative perspective, about the nexus between self-government and the government of others. Therefore, we will try, next, to reconstruct in detail Judith Butler’s interpretation of Foucault’s notion of critique, seeking to extract possible ethical developments for the idea of human formation thought in the post-foundationalist approach.<sup>5</sup> As a matter of the required page limit for the essay, we will focus our investigation on two texts: “What is critique? Critique and *Aufklärung*” by Michel Foucault (2007) and “What is critique?”

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<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault (2004) dedicates the first classes of the course *The hermeneutics of the subject* to the problem of the ethical investigation of the subject in the dialogue between Socrates and Alcibiades, arguing in what sense the good of governing others depends on the ethical government of self. Concomitantly, Foucault addresses this complex ethical-formative relationship between Socrates and Alcibiades from the perspective of a formative erotic in the second volume of his *History of Sexuality* (The use of pleasure), specifically in the fifth chapter entitled “True love” (FOUCAULT, 1985). For an interpretation of the formative sense of the Platonic dialogue *The Banquet* with Foucauldian inspiration, see Dalbosco and Pagotto-Euzebio (2022).

<sup>5</sup> As we cannot now enter into this broad and complex debate on post-foundationalism, we refer the reader to Karsten Schubert’s recent essay on the subject (2021, p. 43-58) and Flügel-Martinsin (2010, p. 139-154).

by Judith Butler (2013).<sup>6</sup> In the context of this textual delimitation, we seek to support the hypothesis that critique can only be adequately exercised as self-critique since it is precisely this requirement of self-critique, also present at the basis of the fruitful educational idea, that human formation is possible as self-formation. Now, this umbilical nexus between critique and formation and between self-critique and self-formation permeates the argumentation of the two authors, justifying especially the ethical-formative conclusions drawn by Butler from her interpretation of Foucault's notion of "critique."

## I

Let us start with Michel Foucault then. In 1978, at the French Society of Philosophy, he lectured "What is critique?" summarizing, in this communication, in a certain sense, the core of his own historical-philosophical procedure. Foucault seeks to justify what critique is by inserting himself in the German philosophical-sociological tradition, which began with Immanuel Kant and, passing through Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Weber, flows into the Critical Theory of Society, whose main exponents are Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. Subsequently, as the second step of the lecture, Foucault promotes the passage from analysis about knowledge to power, seeking to justify his own concept of "critique" based on the tensional relationship between knowledge and power (Foucault, 2007).

There are undoubtedly many aspects of Foucault's lecture that would deserve a detailed investigation, confronting the arguments offered by him to justify his historical-philosophical procedure as a critical-reflective procedure for interpreting the tradition of German thought to which he refers. In this context, an interesting question would be to understand why he reduces this broad and complex intellectual tradition to the Kantian question about the transcendental conditions of a possible experience since Kant understands his philosophical undertaking more broadly, encompassing three other questions, in addition to that referred to "what can I know?". Thus, the three questions "What should I do?", "What can I expect?" and the main one, "What

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<sup>6</sup> This textual delimitation frees us from addressing, at least momentarily, with the relationship between critique and virtue in the context of Foucault's broad intellectual development, both to the period before 1978 and after. However, we consider that critique and virtue is directly related mainly to the genealogical project of the late Foucault subject. For an understanding of such a project, see Foucault (1989, p. 15-38) and, in the secondary literature, the enlightening essays of Geuss (2003, p. 145-166) and Saar (2003, p. 157-180).

is man?”, if taken seriously, would they not refer the problem of critique to other paths not suggested by Foucault at that conference? That means if the historical-philosophical procedure defended by Foucault had considered the other paths opened by these issues, would he not have added indispensable aspects to enrich his own procedure? Wouldn't he, for example, have more adequately justified the link between critique and virtue, addressed only later in his work, if he had interpreted Kant's thought more broadly and not just in a restricted epistemological sense?

This seems to be the procedure adopted by him in the following years, especially in the course taught at the Collège de France in 1982, entitled *The Government of the Self and Others*, when interpreting the thought of Immanuel Kant as one of the foundations of his ontology of the present.<sup>7</sup> By distancing from the problem of the transcendental justification of knowledge and, thus, by freeing from the weight of Kantian epistemological architecture, Foucault discovers more interesting and more appropriate clues to investigate the nexus between actuality and the subject who asks about actuality, establishing the link between critique and *Aufklärung* in a reflexive dimension quite different from that developed in his 1978 lecture (Foucault, 2013). By reconstructing the trajectory adopted by Foucault in the first two classes of the 1982 course mentioned above, we can see how much the issue of the Kantian *Aufklärung*, placed far beyond the “paradigm” of transcendental knowledge, becomes decisive to thinking about the constitutive tension of the human condition between processes of subjugation and desubjugation. In other words, in the context of this lecture by Foucault, Kant figures as the inspirer of decisive freedom practices for the critical formation of subjectivation processes aimed at “involuntary servitude” and “reflexive indocility.” It is not only the transcendental theorist, but especially the thinker of pure singularities who, when confronting adulthood with the condition of minority, places the courage to think for oneself at the center of the relationship between critique and *Aufklärung*. Thus, in the course, *The government of the self and others*, the problem of the relationship between critique and virtue gains its singularity because Foucault

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<sup>7</sup> The ontology of the present, understood in the context of Foucault's investigative architecture, permeates his three great domains of knowledge, power, and the subject. For the purposes of this essay, it is important to highlight the intertwining between the double question, namely, by actuality and by the subject themselves who asks for actuality. Such intertwining, Foucault justifies, in a clear and detailed way, in the first two classes of the course *The Government of Self and Others* (Foucault, 2013). It is in this sense that, according to Rabinow and Dreyfus, ontology of the present and ontology of ourselves form two dimensions of Foucault's critical ontology, both presupposing, simultaneously, working on oneself and responding to one's own time (RABINOW; DREYFUS, 1990, p. 55-69). Therefore, while the ontology of the present necessarily leads to a diagnosis of the epoch - and this is what characterizes philosophy as thinking of actuality -, the ontology of ourselves requires the subject's work on themselves, that is, the ethical government of self.

extrapolates the specifically epistemological field - centered on the transcendental question by the conditions of possibility of *a priori* knowledge - interprets, in an original way, how the Kantian *Aufklärung* exemplarily conceives philosophical modernity as a critical attitude. Kant could only do so, according to Foucault, because the Greco-Latin tradition of parrhesia-libertas deeply inspired him. In other words, the courage to think for oneself that characterizes the work of ethical-political formation of the public intellectual (*Geblerter*) takes root in the double profile of the ancient master: in his frank speech and in his constant search for coherence between saying and doing, that is, between discourse and action (Dalbosco; Rossetto, Dutra; Bertotto, 2022).<sup>8</sup>

Even though Foucault, in 1978, allowed himself to be excessively guided by the paradigm of knowledge and thought about the link between critique and *Aufklärung* in a markedly epistemological record, he was nevertheless able to require another type of link that only announces, but without addressing it in detail, namely, the relationship between critique and virtue. What was he supposed to have in mind when defending critique as virtue? What virtue is it about, and in what sense would it allow him to broaden his own notion of critique and better clarify his historical-philosophical procedure? What conceptual clues would be opened to problematize the subject's ethical formation, opposing it to the processes of subjection?

Judith Butler performs one of the most creative and consistent readings of Foucault's thought, even offering an updated interpretation of the lecture "What is critique?". In this interpretation, the author also focuses on the link between critique and virtue, analyzing it retroactively, based on some of Foucault's later writings, especially Introduction to the *History of Sexuality II: The Use of Pleasure*. As a result, we will take it as the main reference in this essay to investigate the notion of "critique" as virtue and seek to see to what extent "critique" as virtue helps to think about human formation in an ethical-political sense. In this context, Butler offers important clues about the subject's self-formation that show how much "critique," as virtue, needs the formative dimension to clarify itself since the critical attitude better justifies its virtuosity when it manages to properly understand the tension between the being formed and the forming of oneself.

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<sup>8</sup> For an interpretation of this same course *The government of self and others*, in the sense of presenting Foucault as an "advocate" of philosophical modernity as a critical attitude, in order to think about the educational problem, specifically, aspects related to school education, see Pagni and Almeida (2021, p. 196-215).



## II

In the introductory part of his essay, “What is critique? An essay on Foucault’s virtue,” Butler refers briefly to the positions of Raymond Williams, Theodor Adorno, and Jürgen Habermas on the notion of “critique” to, compared to Foucault, evidence his progressive political philosophy. From this comparison, it is worth retaining her brief reference to Habermas since it is instructive to understand the very focus of analysis developed by Butler and the specificity of the notion of “critique” that she intends to find in Foucault.<sup>9</sup> In this context, the Habermasian effort to update the notion of “critique” became, in Butler’s eyes, quite problematic insofar as, in seeking to take a step beyond the previous critical theory, it restricted the notion of “critique” to the conditioning of evaluative judgments about social conditions and goals to existing norms. According to Butler: “In his view, he is able to call foundations into question, denaturalize social and political hierarchy, and even establish perspectives by which a certain distance on the naturalized world can be had. (Butler, 2013, p. 161). This general definition of “critique” perhaps does not bring in itself greater difficulties and can be assumed by different philosophical conceptions since it contains a nuclear aspect of the original meaning of the critical attitude, namely, the effort of detachment, loaded with astonishment, to the naturalized world of *doxa*, meaning unjustified natural beliefs.<sup>10</sup> Such an effort needs to be made to be able to think about the world in another way, which would not be possible if human beings were completely absorbed by the very world where they live, that is, if they remained only in the naturalized world of their *doxa*. Critique then means expressing its meaning metaphorically, the movement of leaving the bubble, rupturing the bubble to see it in another way, which is only possible when outside it. Showing the subject the way out of the bubble seems to be the arduous formative task of philosophy, which cannot exempt itself from making a critical scrutiny of the possible limits inherent in conducting this task. For this reason, “critique,” in this required

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<sup>9</sup> The way Jürgen Habermas and Michel Foucault interpret modernity and the notions of “enlightenment”, and “critique” derived from it has become an important chapter of contemporary philosophical thought. From Habermas’ perspective, his book entitled *The philosophical discourse of modernity* became a classic, especially the ninth and tenth chapters (Habermas, 1988, p. 279-343). From Foucault’s perspective, it is worth mentioning his lecture “What is enlightenment?” (1990, p. 35-54). In this same context, the collection organized by Eva Erdmann, Reiner Forst, and Axel Honneth (1990) contains essays that deal with Foucault’s critique of modern enlightenment, and some of these essays refer, as could not be different, to Habermas’s own critique of Foucault’s interpretation of the “modern ethos”.

<sup>10</sup> This posture of original astonishment Foucault links, in the first hour of the January 1982 class of the course *The hermeneutics of the subject*, to the care of the self, conceiving it as a principle of permanent restlessness (Foucault, 2004). Now, it is precisely this “permanent restlessness” that marks the indispensable ethical posture that the subject needs to have with themselves in order to be able to govern others.

normative sense, is always related to self-critique, that is, to the willingness to question one's own judgments.<sup>11</sup>

But where, then, does the problematic aspect of Habermas's notion of critique lie? According to Butler, it consists of Habermas' "enabling strong normative judgments" to justify his critical procedure; and he does so in such a way as to make his own sense of normativity uncritical. The whole question about the meaning of singular action, expressed by the general question "what should I do?", is inserted in the context of an already constituted "we," with its values and customs that reveal the horizon of possible action and delimit the subject's own field of action.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, Butler criticizes Habermas for enabling strong normative judgments that make, according to her, his own sense of normativity uncritical. It is worth asking whether this critique of this "strong" sense of normativity means the refusal of any normativity or whether Butler still postulates any normativity and, if so, what normativity it would be. Disconcerting, here, is the claim that the author makes, not only for herself but also for Foucault, of a sense of normativity, also "strong," but in the opposite direction to that postulated by Habermas. Precisely in this context of discussion, she formulates the hypothesis that she intends to defend in that essay. In her own words: "Indeed, in this essay, I hope to show that Foucault not only makes an important contribution to *normative theory*, but that both his aesthetics and his account of the subject are integrally related to both his ethics and politics" (Butler, 2013, p. 162; emphasis added). From this brief passage, it is necessary to retain two important ideas for the point under discussion: first, Foucault contributes decisively to normative theory, and second, the close relationship between aesthetics and subject with ethics and politics. Considering the numerous difficulties that the problem brings together, we are led to formulate the following two questions: where would Foucault's contribution lie? In what way are aesthetics and the subject intrinsically linked with ethics and politics? The investigation of these two questions in the context of the answer Butler offered leads us to the very critical sense attributed by Foucault to normativity when conceiving, although without satisfactorily justifying, critique as virtue.

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<sup>11</sup> The notion of critique as self-critique depends, of course, on an appropriate notion of reason that enables the intended self-critical exercise. On this point, see the problematization offered by Herbert Schnädelbach (2007).

<sup>12</sup> It is necessary to consider that Butler's interpretation of Habermas is, in this essay, very schematic and quick, not conforming to the problem in the way Habermas addresses it in his fundamental ethical-philosophical works. Certainly, careful reading of such works would offer important counterarguments to Butler's objection.



Playing entirely in the theoretical-philosophical field proposed by Foucault and seeking to understand his definition of critique, Butler locates its meaning in the intellectual effort made to indicate the limits of human knowledge, initiated in Modernity by Kant and later closely followed by Foucault. Here, in the first specific reconstructive movement of Foucault's essay "What is critique?", critique springs from an eminently epistemological soil in order to highlight the limits of the regime of truth that subjects human beings to a certain socio/historical context. In the context of this initial link between critique and knowledge, Butler poses the following question: "What is the relation of knowledge to power such that our epistemological certainties turn out to support a way of structuring the world that forecloses alternative possibilities of ordering?" (Butler, 2013, p. 162). When we closely follow Foucault's argument in that essay, it becomes possible to observe, considering Butler's own formulation, that the discussion no longer remains restricted only to the Kantian approach since reflection now requires the nexus between knowledge and power to be able to denounce the impediment to new alternatives that our epistemological certainties represent. Reflectively understanding the origin and motives of such impediment, as well as envisioning possible alternatives, then becomes a central task of the critical attitude based on the link between critique and virtue, as postulated by Foucault and pursued in her own way by Butler.

In this regard, we could say that the normativity of critique rests on its ability to break with certainties that support the structuring of the world in such a way as to prevent the emergence of other possible structures. Thus, it is precisely from the limits of our certainties that the practice of critique emerges, as Butler (2013, p. 164) clearly states: "And it is from this condition, the tear in the fabric of our epistemological web, that the practice of critique emerges, with the awareness that no discourse is adequate here or that our reigning discourses have produced an impasse." Let us retain, for now, only one decisive aspect of the issue: the normativity of critique rests on the nexus between knowledge and power. In other words, on the capacity to break epistemological certainties to provoke the emergence of other possible readings of the world. Therefore, critique is always, when defined in terms of the Kantian epistemological paradigm, the indication of the limits of human knowledge. And, when associated with the analytic of Foucault's power, it investigates and denounces the "furor of power," that is, its destructive effects on the free formation of subjectivation processes.

It is on this epistemological approach of critique that Butler seeks to investigate the deeper link between critique and virtue. Does this new link, already postulated by Foucault

himself without, however, having been explicitly justified, mean only the deepening of the normative sense inherent in the link between critique and knowledge, or does it point to another, broader and, at the same time, more specific sense of normativity? In other words, is it possible to understand virtue beyond an epistemological record, thus allowing us to find an entirely new sense of critical normativity that was just beginning to be outlined in the 1978 Foucauldian lecture? Now, this is precisely the hypothesis that we seek to sustain here, with initial support in Butler's interpretation: when critique is thought of from its link with virtue and, therefore, is not restricted only to the epistemological record, in the sense of the transcendental investigation of the conditions of possibility of knowledge, then it emerges an entirely new sense of normativity, so that it becomes nuclear for Foucault to investigate the processes of subjectivation that are born of the tension between subjugation and desubjugation and that are the basis of the formation of the subject. This new conception of normativity allows us to establish, in a more in-depth way, the intertwining between technologies of domination and technologies of the self, objects of investigation, in the following years, especially in the last courses taught at the Collège de France and in the lectures given in the 1980s at universities in several countries (Foucault, 2004; 2008; 2011; 2013).

### III

For Butler, there are different basic procedural ways to be considered better to understand the Foucauldian justification of critique as “virtue”. In this context, it is important to retain Butler's general consideration of the notion of virtue as an attribute or practice of the subject or the quality that both characterizes and conditions their action. Therefore, virtue is directly linked to the subject's action, characterizing and conditioning it. Next, the author offers the following definition of virtue:

It belongs to an ethics which is not fulfilled merely by following objectively formulated rules or laws. And virtue is not only a *way* of complying with or conforming with preestablished norms. It is, more radically, a critical relation to those norms, one which, for Foucault, takes shape as a specific stylization of morality (Butler, 2013, p. 164; author's emphasis added).

This passage exposes the core of the definition of virtue that guides, in a way, the Foucauldian investigation that begins to develop in the 1978 lecture and that predominates in its subsequent investigative path. Thus, virtue, belonging to an ethic, not only does not conform to existing social norms, but considers them in a radical way and, therefore, establishes a critical relationship with them in terms of “a specific stylization of morality.” Understanding what this stylization means seems to be the most appropriate way to clarify the core of Foucault’s thesis of critique as virtue. If the undertaking is successful in this direction, the apparently disconcerting aspect of the conception of “critique as virtue” ceases to exist, so that it becomes possible to conceive Foucault as a theorist of a critical normativity based on the notion of virtue. In short, this interpretation allows us to build the image of a Foucault who defends critical, anti-foundationist, and non-prescriptivist normativity.

To conduct the above procedure, Butler investigates the notion of “virtue” in the introduction to the *History of Sexuality II: the use of pleasure*, seeking to derive from it a non-prescriptive sense of moral experience. From this reconstruction, we can extract an essential reference since virtue is understood as a normative moral experience, but in no way prescriptive. So, it makes sense to ask how Foucault understands, in that text, virtue as a normative moral experience of a non-prescriptive nature, which would happen in the specific terms of a stylization of morality. This requires understanding, according to Foucault himself, moral experience as something that does not strictly conform either to legal law or to the rule or command that mechanically standardizes the subject. That is, the stylization of morality has to do precisely with this contrary movement, not of mechanical uniformity, but of the practice of freedom that opens the space for the self-formation of the subject. Therefore, such stylization is opposed to any prescriptive procedure that imposes the blind observation of rules or norms without questioning them. In Butler’s words: “Moral experience has to do with a self-transformation prompted by a form of knowledge that is foreign to one’s own. And this form of moral experience will be different from the submission to a command” (Butler, 2013, p. 165).

In these terms, the notion of “virtue” clearly points to the rupture with submission to a command; such a rupture, in turn, requires the subject’s self-transformation, driven by (intellectual) experiences foreign to the subject’s own usual way of life. Therefore, the nuclear point is that this type of moral experience requires a form of procedure that goes beyond the exclusivity of the cognitive act in the merely epistemological sense since the postulated moral experience implies a singular formative experience, prior and simultaneously preparatory to the

epistemological questioning made by the subject about the regime or the politics of truth that subjects it. Thus, the stylization of morality presupposes – and this is the hypothesis we support – a formative dimension based on different models of exercises (or practices of the self) that enable the subject to break with their usual ways of living and, simultaneously, to cultivate other alternative forms of life. And this relates to the notion of “self-formation” of the subject, claimed by Butler. It is, therefore, the defense of a broader normativity than its epistemological sense as far as it links a notion of “virtue” associated with the need for a permanent critical posture to the existing one and, therefore, of self-transformation. It is worth asking: to what extent is the attitude of critique of the existing directly associated with that of self-formation? Now, this connection is possible to the extent that self/formation is promoted through spiritual exercises, such as reading, writing, listening, meditation, etc., empowering and transforming the subject through the no longer naive understanding of the reality of which they are a part.

Therefore, it is necessary to understand, in detail, what this stylization of morality properly means and what practical effects, in the sense of the subject’s self-transformation, it causes since such understanding helps to clarify the meaning of critique as virtue. The stylization of morality is translated there by the expression “arts of existence” (art of living), meaning an ethical-aesthetic scope of formation of the subject as self-transformation that obviously goes far beyond the merely epistemological record.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, through the cultivation of such arts, the subject is led to transcend the moral norms and precepts by which they were fully accustomed to live. In other words, it is the arts of existence that enable the subject to break with the strict command imposed by the mechanical standardization of norms. According to Butler (2013, p. 165), “What is at issue for him [Foucault] is not behaviors or ideas or societies or ‘ideologies,’ but ‘the problematizations through which being offers itself to be, necessarily, thought—and

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<sup>13</sup> This problem can be traced in *The hermeneutics of the subject*, a course given at the Collège de France in 1982, when Foucault seeks to recover the notion of “care of the self” that was sidelined by the tradition of “know thyself”. In this sense, his effort to justify in ancient, Greco-Roman morality the passage from the *logos* to the *ethos* can be seen, in a way, as his search for the “stylization of morality”, that is, for the *tékhnē tou biou* (art of living). Foucault clarifies this point in a lapidary passage of *The hermeneutics of the subject*: “Making one’s life the object of a *tekhnē*, making one’s life a work – a beautiful and good work (as everything produced by a good and reasonable *tekhnē* must be) necessarily entails the freedom and choice of the person employing this *tekhnē*” (Foucault, 2004, p. 513). Thus, and therein lies an important difference from the specifically epistemological approach, making life a beautiful and good work is, as a stylization of existence, the most appropriate way to take seriously the problem of the freedom of human action. In this sense, in the 1978 lecture, Foucault conceives critique as the most appropriate dimension of human freedom to address the problem of subjugation and, therefore, his insistence on linking critique to virtue.

the practices on the basis of which these problematizations are formed.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, one can see how deeply this notion of “arts of existence” referred to here is intertwined with the very ontology of the present, even presupposing it since it focuses on the problematizations that make the self-reflection of the subject possible, through its own practices. It is the ontology of the present, as an investigation of the different practices of the self, that reveals to the subject the possibility of understanding themselves.<sup>15</sup> In short, the ethical requirement, put in terms of a critical virtue, rests on the scrutiny of the self through different exercises (practices of the self), such scrutiny being the constitutive core of what could be understood as the subject’s self-formation.

## IV

In this context, it is worth highlighting the double movement required by the practices of the self that characterize, at the same time, the very ontology of the present. The first movement consists of bringing to light the constituent plot of the regime of truth that prescribes to the subject certain moral norms and codes that require mechanical obedience. The second movement intends to unveil alternatives to such a regime on the same subject, leading them to practices of de-subjection. In this way, one of the main characteristics of critique as virtue becomes evident: it consists not only in resisting the given mechanical uniformity, but also in constructing alternatives to overcome it. This leads to the subject’s transformation to the moral norms given, especially to what they require of subjection and voluntary servitude.

Summing up what has been exposed so far, critique as virtue leads to the stylization of morality, which, taking the form of “the arts of existence,” requires the transformation of the self. With this, Butler’s reconstruction reaches another level, having to clarify what self-transformation of the subject means in order to be able to show, then, with greater precision,

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<sup>14</sup> Foucault investigates, in detail, the practices of the self in the ancient Greco-Roman tradition, in the last courses given at the Collège de France, especially in *The hermeneutics of the subject*. Special emphasis should be given, among the practices, to listening, examination of conscience, reading, writing, and meditation.

<sup>15</sup> In the course *The government of self and others*, the ontology of the present gains its own uniqueness insofar as it is justified on the basis of the root that the Kantian *Aufklärung* inherits from the Greco-Roman parrhesia. That is, the ancient Parrhesiastic heritage of the Kantian *Aufklärung* becomes an indispensable reference to justify today’s critical thinking, which means, at the same time, the ontology of ourselves. Therefore, the nexus between parrhesia and *Aufklärung* becomes decisive to think about the umbilical relationship between current ontology and ontology of ourselves (Dalbosco; Rossetto; Dutra; Bertotto, 2020).

the new meaning that critique assumes as virtue. In this context, Foucault's subsequent productions accentuate the contrast between ethics that leads to the command of the subject, subordinating them in an unrestricted way to the current norms, and another notion of "ethics" that increases the self-creation of this same subject, leading them to free themselves from ethics based on mechanical automatism progressively. All this is important to understand better, now, that we can understand the distinction assumed by the essay "What is critique?" from 1978, between obedience and virtue. According to Butler (p. 167): "in his essay, "What is Critique?" Foucault contrasts this yet-to-be-defined understanding of "virtue" with obedience, showing how the possibility of this form of virtue is established through its difference from an uncritical obedience to authority.". Virtue relates here, therefore, to the attitude or procedure that is opposed to any kind of thoughtless obedience to authority. That means virtue authorizes only that type of obedience capable of resisting the sieve of clarification.

This idea of critique makes even more understandable the fascination that the link established by Kant between critique and *Aufklärung* exerts on Foucault's own effort to update the critical attitude since Kant had established that link precisely to break with the naturalness of the association between obedience and absence of reasoning. Those who passively accept obedience without reasoning are submerged in the state of minority (*Unmündigkeit*) and, with that, very far from an enlightened position, that is, from a critical attitude, characterized as majority (*Mündigkeit*). Although Foucault does not fully accept the Kantian stance and sympathizes even less with the Enlightenment effort on reason, he assumes the general critical premise, according to which one should never obey without reasoning. This legacy of the Kantian enlightenment subsequently marks its return to the old moral question and the nuclear ethical-political problem ascribed by it to subsequent Western culture, namely, the tensional relationship between self-government and the government of others.<sup>16</sup>

However, in the context of Butler's interpretation (2013, p. 167), for Foucault, "critique begins with questioning the demand for absolute obedience and subjecting every governmental obligation imposed on subjects to a rational and reflective evaluation." Therefore, critique allied to virtue always implies, as we will see, the courage to resist being governed simply in this or

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<sup>16</sup> This is, as we know, the ethical-political core of the course *The government of self and others*, taught at the Collège de France during 1982 and 1983 (Foucault, 2013).



that way. For without such courage, the subject is not able to rise against the processes of subjection that hinder their own freedom.

In summary, the critical attitude means – and here lies its proper political dimension - the reflective examination of any form of obedience and, especially, of those forms that originate from authoritarian government obligations imposed on citizens. We can now ask ourselves: What does this political dimension of critique have to do with the transformation of the self? Or, in another way, why is the transformation of the self indispensable for the seemingly so natural rupture between obedience and absence of reflection to occur? Immediately, we are inclined to respond that, without the practice of critique based on the transformation of the self, there is no rupture of the model of authority that requires unrestricted obedience. Thus, critique explicitly becomes a virtue since it triggers in the subject a set of practices and exercises that lead them to think about themselves and, more fundamentally, to question the different forms of obedience imposed by external authoritarianism, whether governmental, religious, or even educational.

Critique as virtue then requires the passage from the state of absolute obedience to obedience based on reasons. This only becomes possible to the extent that the transformation of the self occurs. The intriguing aspect of the problem lies in the motive that drives such a passage. In other words, what motivates the subject to no longer want to be governed in this or that way, thus being led to break the vicious circle between unrestricted obedience and absence of thought. In the lecture “What is critique?”, Foucault conceives the human desire not to want to be governed in this or that way as the original motive of critique. Although the link between this motive and virtue itself is not clear, the fact is that no human being is predestined to any form of absolute obedience, as there are always possibilities for the norms and the form of government to be seen from another perspective. This results in an important consequence, namely, that the very fact of the rules being followed can, at any time, be called into question. In this sense, following a rule cannot have, from a critical point of view, an absolute and unquestionable value. Therefore, being governed in this way by a particular individual, group, or government is not an unquestionable fact, but a historical, cultural, and political event and, as such, always subject to questioning. Without properly understanding this possibility, one does not approximate the notion of resistance as a way of practicing resistance as a critical attitude.

Precisely here, according to Butler, the political dimension of critique as virtue is manifested: “Whatever *virtue* Foucault here circumscribes for us will have to do with *objecting* to that *imposition of power*, to its costs, to the way in which it is administered, to those who do that administering” (Butler, 2013, p. 168; emphasis added). Critique as virtue then becomes a political critique of authoritatively imposed power and all the destructive effects generated by it. The virtuosity of critique consists in resistance to such imposition, opening the field to other possibilities that can build new webs of relationships between subjects and their respective groups. In short, the art of resisting is the form taken by critique as virtue.<sup>17</sup> But for this to happen, the subject needs to be prepared, that is, to go through a long process of transformation of the self, which requires formative work so that critique can show itself as an ethical-political virtue.

To reflect more deeply on the problem inherent in the act of being governed and show how authoritarian power impedes the practices of freedom indispensable to the transformation of the self, Butler takes up Foucault’s distinction between government and governmentization. For the latter, Foucault understands the movement of subjection of individuals to a social practice through power relations based on a certain regime or politics of truth. Governmentalization, therefore, guarantees a specific way of being governed that implies “to be governed is not only to have a form imposed upon one’s existence, but to be given the terms within which existence will and will not be possible” (Butler, 2013, p. 170). The unacceptable aspect of the politics of truth that sustains the mechanism of governmentalization lies in its closure. In other words, on its prior and absolute determination of what is true and that sustains the fixity of rules and customs, making subjects believe that such fixity is something simply natural. Therefore, as Butler (2013, p. 171) explains, “the politics of truth pertains to those relations of power that circumscribe in advance what will and will not count as truth, which order the world in certain regular and regulatable ways, and which we come to accept as the given field of knowledge.” In summary, governmentization characterizes, according to the 1978 lecture, the authoritarian and dominating side of power that, anchored in a politics of truth, establishes in advance and in an absolute way what and how subjects should be. Therefore, the

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<sup>17</sup> The nexus between critique and resistance is a core theme of the very conception of critique as virtue. Considering that we cannot address this topic in detail here, we refer the reader to the essay by André Duarte and Maria Rita de Assis Cesar (2019). Butler herself deals more systematically with the problem of resistance and its relationship with subjugation and resignification (Butler, 2018, p. 89-112). Another very timely and Foucault-inspired approach in this regard can be found in Gros (2018).

governmentalization defined in these terms represents the perfect example of prescriptive normativity, blocking what is most important in the subject, that is, their freedom of choice to decide what they intend and can be.

If governmentalization shows the authoritarian and destructive side of power, how is critique defined in opposition to it? Critique means the reflective exercise of the subject, anchored in the different modalities of stylization of morality, to interrogate the politics of truth that sustains governmentalization itself. But it is not any reflective exercise, but one understood as an art and, more specifically, as Foucault states in the essay, an “art of involuntary servitude, of reflective indocility” (Foucault, 2007, p. 11).<sup>18</sup> Therefore, when defined as unstable and indomitable art, critique cannot be taken as a single act and, even less, belonging only to the subjective domain since it assumes the stylized relationship with the regime of truth from which it emerges and against which it turns. Thus, it becomes decisive to understand the meaning of this stylized relationship and its type of style because there lies the core of the anti-foundationalist notion of critique. Butler answers this question as follows: “the style will be critical to the extent that, as style, it is not fully determined in advance, it incorporates a contingency over time that marks the limits to the ordering capacity of the field in question” (Butler, 2013, p. 171). That means indeterminacy and contingency are the two main characteristics of both involuntary servitude and reflexive indocility that strengthen freedom practices, making the subject resistant to the subjugations caused by a certain politics of truth and their respective absolutist and inflexible pretensions. The important aspect of this indeterminacy and contingency is that it prevents the prior, absolute, and inflexible existence of a subject’s *telos*, and this has important repercussions for the notion of human formation (Dalbosco, 2019).

Thus, critique as virtue enables the subject to deeply question their own identity, that is, what others intend to impose on them authoritatively in a given regime of truth and, more importantly, what they themselves can do to find their own identity as opposed to what is imposed on them authoritatively. According to Butler, what is at stake is the ethical-political sense of human freedom since the nexus between critique and virtue opens the possibility for

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<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to note that the use of the expression “art” in the context of the 1978 lecture is a clear indication that Foucault is already on the right track of the *tékhnē tou biou* (art of living) of the last courses taught at the Collège de France (Foucault, 2004, 2011 and 2013), and it is such art that will allow him to think about the nexus between critique and virtue in a more consistent and comprehensive way. In other words, the different practices of the self made possible by the *tékhnē tou biou* give an increasingly comprehensive concreteness to the “inservile and indocile art”.

the subject to question what, after all, they intend to be and what are the scope and limits imposed on the path of such pretension. This questioning of the human condition, provided by critique as virtue, is announced by Foucault in the following terms: “what, therefore, am I, who belong to this humanity, perhaps to this piece of it, at this point in time, at this instant of humanity which is subjected to the power of truth in general and truths in particular?” (Foucault, 2007, p 22). Taking oneself as a source of reflection, thinking about one’s own existence exactly at the moment when one lives is a requirement that can only be fulfilled within the scope of the exercise of oneself over oneself, and that leads to the transformation of the self. Now, the driving force of this is critique as virtue, especially when it takes the form, as we have seen, of stylized morality and, above all, more specifically, in the context of late Foucault, when the ancient tradition of *tekhne tou biou* directly inspires critique as virtue.

In this context, according to Butler, the stylization of the subject as a form of resistance gains even greater evidence when Foucault, inserting himself in the critical tradition of the post-Kantian left, unveils the destructive aspect inherent in the relationship between rationality and power. However, seeking to go beyond Max Weber and the Frankfurt School, he denounces the “furor of power” that springs from rationalization. In Butler’s terms: “It [rationalization] reaches its “furor” and its limits as it seizes and pervades the subject it subjectivates. Power sets the limits to what a subject can ‘be,’ beyond which it no longer ‘is,’ or it dwells in a domain of suspended ontology.” (Butler, 2013, p. 172).<sup>19</sup> As we can see, the close bond between rationalization and power provokes ontological precariousness, above all, because it removes from the subject their freedom of choice, leading them to believe that the only possibility of being is that imposed by such a bond since beyond it there would only be non-being, that is, annihilation and death. However, it is precisely from the stylizing forces of the subject (as arts of existence) that their own resistance springs, opening their eyes to the enclosure and impoverishment caused by the destructive link between rationalization and power. This means, in another way, that rationalization finds its limits in the process of de-subjection provoked by

<sup>19</sup> Although Butler does not clarify in detail in the essay under analysis, which means “ontological precariousness”, he implies that such expression refers to the absence of freedom caused by the close link between power and (technical-instrumental) rationality. That is why it is important, in this context, to resort to the broader sense of reason, which springs from the ethical-aesthetic dimension of the human condition, to “return” freedom as its genuine ontological possibility to the subject themselves. Now, it is precisely given this fundamental philosophical problem that Foucault understands the *tekhne tou bio* as the constitutive nucleus of self-practices properly understood as exercises of freedom.

critique as virtue, which shows the authoritarianism and falsity of ontological precariousness<sup>20</sup> caused by the very rationalization that sustains a certain politics of truth.

In this context, there is another critical aspect of Butler's reconstruction that supports the reflection of critique as virtue, referring to original freedom, only presupposed by Foucault in the 1978 lecture, without further deepening. As obscure as the notion of "original freedom" is, Butler believes it is possible to clarify another dimension of the notion of critique, justified by Foucault. The critique is not limited to the purpose of highlighting the limits of knowledge and the destructive effects of its respective regime of truth since it has mainly the objective of "to risk one's very formation as a subject" (Butler, 2013, p. 177). This clearly signals the fact that it is not enough just for the subject to stand outside and analyze the regime of truth and the destructive effects of power linked to such a regime, lamenting the imprisonment and impoverishment suffered. In fact, what matters is their act of courage to put themselves in the situation and, in addition to analyzing the impacts that the effects of a given power have on them, to be willing to risk their own formation, to break with the precarious ontology imposed by the politics of truth to which they are subjected. That means if one of the senses of critique as virtue enables the subject to reflexively distance from the established authority, the other, and certainly the most important, consists of the "act of courage, acting without guarantees, risking the subject at the limits of its ordering." (Butler, 2013, p. 176). In Butler's formulation, there is another dimension of the link between critique and virtue that encourages the subject to risk, without having security, against the "furor of power." However, this risk without guarantee constitutes the eminently ethical-formative aspect of the stylization of morality since it requires from the subject an intense exercise of subjectivation in order to oppose the subjection imposed by the authoritarian power effectively. This other dimension leads, then, to the properly formative aspect of critique as virtue that flows into the subject's own self-formation.

How does Butler justify this aspect of the subject's self-training? It refers to ascetic work, that is, to the practices of the self that the subject does aiming at their de-subjection and, therefore, it directly concerns the problem of the "arts of existence" or *the tékhne tou bíou* itself. To clarify it, Butler resumes the "Introduction" to *the Use of Pleasure*, a text to which she had already referred previously, focusing there on the tension between "modes of subjection and

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<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, in his book *Precarious Life*, Butler takes the notion of "precariousness" in the political sense, to understand our sociability through the fragile and necessary dimensions of our own interdependence (Butler, 2022).

subjectivation.” In the introduction, Foucault makes it clear that the practices or technologies of the self, the object of his investigation, concern the “care of the self.” In this context, Butler defends, contrary to the usual objection addressed to Foucault, according to which he would have provoked the aestheticization of existence to the detriment of ethics, the idea that both ethics and politics depend on the singular sense of *poiesis*. Now, to show this uniqueness, the author reaches the heart of the problem related to human formation, namely, the tension between the being formed and the forming of the self (self-formation).

What does such tension mean, more precisely? It points to the twofold constitutive dimension of *poiesis* since its self-creative force can only occur within a given politics of norms. In Butler’s terms, “He [Foucault] makes clear that there is no self-forming outside of a mode of subjectivation, which is to say, there is no self-forming outside of the norms that orchestrate the possible formation of the subject.” (Butler, 2013, p. 178). Would we be here, based on this, facing a kind of resignation of critique since the subject is always subject to norms? Not at all, because critique as virtue, at this last moment of Butler’s reconstruction, accentuates the forces of de-subjection provided by the stylization of existence. What must be borne in mind, firstly, is that self-formation does not arise out of nothing since it is always linked to a socio-cultural context of norms; secondly, that the forces of de-subjection themselves do not have unlimited, definitive, and absolute power and, therefore, need to be constantly examined and recreated. In any case, the core point is that critique, as virtue, leads to the idea of self-formation, which represents only “the practice by which the self forms itself in desubjugation” (Butler, 2013, p. 178), and this always occurs in the tensional dialogue with the education where they are inserted. In summary, it is the practices of the self exercised by the subject – as the core of their own self-formation - that institute the conditions of desubjugation in the face of all forms of servitude and absence of thought. Such practices provide an understanding of the tension that constitutes the subject’s own self-formation between being formed and forming themselves under a constitutively intersubjectivist prism.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> By conceiving formation as self-formation and placing it on the basis of critique as virtue, Butler resumes a classic theme of the German *Bildung*. For a current interpretation of this problem, letting oneself be moved by the provocation “What does it mean to be a well-formed subject?”, see the essay by Peter Bieri (2012, p. 228-240).



## V

It seems to become clearer, after we have followed Butler's reconstruction step by step, because, in 1978, Foucault was only able to announce the link between critique and virtue. However, he has already used the expression "art" as an indication of the rich human formative experience of the *tekhnē tou biou*. It also becomes clearer now because critique as virtue could only receive a more adequate justification when Foucault himself realized, in the following years, the scope of the stylization of morality for the transformation of the self, that is, for the critical self-formation of the subject. In the 1978 lecture, critique as virtue is inserted in the striking record of the analysis of power, advancing, only in the form of a few flashes, the turn to the analysis of the subject that would occur in the following years.

Therefore, the nexus between knowledge and power that guides the notion of "critique" is still predominantly guided by the paradigm of knowledge and, by insisting on the need to break our epistemological certainties, leads to the fraying of the fabric that constitutes them. In this sense, the virtuosity of critique lies – and this is not enough, although still insufficient to account for the integral formation of free subjectivities - on the limits of knowledge that sustain the regime of truth from which the rules and norms accepted as valid originate. Critique as virtue thought in epistemological terms also assumes the role of evidencing the destructive effects of power sustained by a certain regime of truth.

However, what only appears as flashes in 1978 gains more defined outlines in the following years of Foucault's intellectual production. The shift to the stylization of morality allows critique as virtue to gain greater reach. It then signals a broader aesthetic-moral experience of a spiritual nature not restricted to the cognitive procedure in the epistemological sense, but connected to the transformation of the subject through different practices of freedom. In this context, critique as virtue, which can also be understood as the virtuosity of a model of critique that goes beyond its epistemological contours, allows us to risk our own formation as subjects.

For this reason, it consists of the act of courage to put oneself in one's own situation, willing to put oneself at risk to seek new possibilities of being. That is, it is an act without guarantees, which threatens and tensions the subject before the limits of the ordination of which they are part, and to do so, they need to risk themselves. Now, it is only a non-prescriptive normativity, that is, open and inconclusive, that is able to understand risk as a condition of

possibility of the subject's own self-formation. Far from a solipsistic stance, the virtuosity of critique always makes room for other new possibilities of opening up oneself and other subjects, which demands the critical attitude linked to a long process of transformation of oneself with the other subjects, in the ethical-political sense of a permanently critical normativity, also to the existing one.

The scope of Butler's reading lies mainly in focusing on the broadening of the spectrum of critique conducted by Foucault and in extracting important consequences from it in order to show how much critique as virtue needs the formative dimension in order to be able to clarify in a post-foundationalist theoretical context of non-prescriptive normativity. If the umbilical link between critique and formation and between self-critique and self-formation permeates the argument of both authors, Butler's greatest merit lies in the ethical-formative conclusions she draws from her interpretation of Foucault. With this step, Butler's reconstruction of the problem reaches another level, problematizing what self-formation of the subject means to indicate, with greater precision, the new meaning that the Foucauldian notion of "critique" as virtue assumes.

In summary, by using the expression "stylization of morality" to interpret the problem of the relationship between critique and virtue posed by Foucault in the 1978 lecture, Butler goes a step further, already presupposing Foucault's entire subsequent intellectual movement, which will lead him to place the *tékhnē tou bíou* as a practical dimension of the human logos, conceiving it as a source of ontological freedom resistant to any form of subjection. Thus, it is the different practical ways of taking life as a beautiful and good work that guarantees the formation the possibility of transforming into self-formation since the condition of the subject's formation depends on their decision to cultivate themselves intensely, with the same aesthetic care experienced by the artist to create their own work of art.

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