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“Sensitive Killers, Cruel Aesthetes, and Pitiless Poets”: Foucault, Rorty, and the Ethics of Self-Fashioning*

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Michel Foucault's endorsement of an "aesthetics of existence" as an ethical response to the putative retreat of universal moral codes has been criticized as a dangerous formula for an ethics of self-fashioning which philosophically underwrites narcissism and aestheticist cruelty. A Foucauldian care of the self, so the argument goes, leads to a deficit of care for others. This essay advances a number of arguments in defense of Foucault's work. While certain models of self-fashioning harbor disturbing implications in terms of ethical responsiveness and care for others, Foucault's critics fail to acknowledge that not all forms of the aestheticization of ethics and the self result in anti-social or violent behavior. This is demonstrated by comparing Foucault's aestheticist care of the self and another model of self-fashioning—strong poetry—expounded recently by Richard Rorty. The former entails practices which encourage awareness of the contingency and fragility of the self as the product of a web of relations and events. Strong poetry, on the other hand, stems from the desire to fashion, glorify, and transcendentalize an idealized self. By examining a concrete case of aestheticist cruelty, the paper shows that the cold, imperious, and potentially violent aestheticism about which Foucault's critics rightly worry has much more in common with strong poetry. As a result, the concerns of his critics are misplaced. Secondly, it is argued that Foucault's aesthetics of existence is not only not an endorsement of narcissistic and aestheticist indifference to others but that, through a certain reflexive care of the contingent self, it has the capacity to cultivate feelings of curiosity and care in relation to others.

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From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art.

Michel Foucault

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Instead of an ethic of reciprocity or brotherliness, Foucault opts for what we might call a dramaturgical model of conduct, in which action becomes meaningful solely qua performative gesture. But this theory risks sanctioning an approach to ethics that is brazenly particularistic and elitist. Formally, it remains only a hair's breadth removed from Nietzsche's rehabilitation of the right of the stronger.

Richard Wolin

One should see the intellectual *qua* intellectual as having a special, idiosyncratic need—a need for the ineffable, the sublime, a need to go beyond limits [...] But one should not see the intellectual as serving any *social* purpose when he fulfills this need.

Richard Rorty

Suspicion that the work of Michel Foucault harbors ethical and political ambiguities and outright dangers pervades critical commentaries upon it. In particular, his embryonic notion of the “aesthetics of existence,” inspired by the Greco-Roman ethics of self-fashioning, or “the care of the self,” has been seized upon in this regard.¹ This suspicion dovetails with the chorus of criticism heard over the last decade in which post-structuralist thought in general has been denounced as ethically and politically dangerous.² Richard Wolin, for example, rattles the chains of “Thrasymachus’ ghost” and conjures the specter of the predatory Nietzschean immoralist in a bid to discredit Foucault.³ Along with Wolin, critics such as Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, Nancy Fraser, and Thomas McCarthy argue that an interest in self-fashioning and the aestheticization of ethics more often than not belies an underlying elitist preoccupation with the *self* which pays inadequate attention to our obligations to *others*.⁴ An aestheticist approach to ethics and the self, so the

1. See, for example: Linda Alcoff, “Feminism and Foucault: The Limits to a Collaboration,” in *Crises in Continental Philosophy*, ed. Arlene Dallery and Charles Scott (New York: SUNY Press, 1990), 69-86; Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 384-395; Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 17-34; Martin Jay, “The Morals of Genealogy: Or Is There a Poststructuralist Ethics?,” in *Force Fields: Between Intellectual History and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 38-48; Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 489-90; Richard Wolin, “Foucault’s Aesthetic Decisionism,” *Telos* 67 (1986): 71-86.

2. Examples of this form of criticism can be found in the following works: Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, *French Philosophy of the Sixties: An Essay on Antihumanism*, trans. Mary Cattani (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990); Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1987); Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); and Richard Wolin, *The Terms of Cultural Criticism: The Frankfurt School, Existentialism, Poststructuralism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

3. Wolin, *The Terms of Cultural Criticism*, 1.

4. See, for example: Thomas McCarthy, *Ideals and Illusions: On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1991), 7.

argument goes, encourages a deficit of care for others and threatens, by privileging the criterion of beauty above all other considerations, to underwrite violence and cruelty in the name of aesthetic self-perfection. Accordingly, such an approach to ethics signals not a new form of ethical practice but the demise of ethics altogether. Putting the matter in traditional terms, critics of Foucault would argue that pursuit of the aestheticized, poststructuralist good life of self-creation will inevitably conflict with the dictates of justice, that is, with our obligations to others. The prototypical Foucauldian individual, these critics might say, would make a very poor neighbor and fellow citizen. In the following essay I respond to some of the concerns of Foucault's critics by examining the ethical and political implications of his endorsement of an ethics of self-fashioning. In particular, the essay responds to criticisms that Foucault's writings on self-creation belie the anti-social and elitist tendencies of an "aesthetic modernist" by arguing that, as a mode of self-relation best suited to the radical contingency of existence, the aesthetics of existence is not only *not* an invitation to ignore or abandon our obligations to others but that a certain Foucauldian art of the self may well serve to cultivate relations of care and concern for others.

In the course of defending Foucault's aesthetics of existence the essay also refers to the work of the liberal anti-essentialist thinker Richard Rorty, who, like Foucault, endorses a certain ethic of self-creation—"strong poetry"—in response to the contingency at the root of our inherited vocabularies, identities, and practices.⁵ Rorty's work on self-creation is noteworthy and useful on a number of counts. Firstly, despite the anti-essentialist views they share, Foucault and Rorty offer quite distinct models of ethical self-fashioning with divergent implications for relations of care and concern for others. A heuristic contrast of Foucault's aesthetics of existence with Rorty's strong poetry reveals that there is more than one model of self-creation available to would-be self-fashioners, and that, on closer examination, the kind of narcissistic and callous aestheticism about which Foucault's critics rightly worry has much more in common with the model of self-creation embodied in Rorty's strong poet. As a result, in my view much of the criticism of Foucault's aesthetics of existence has been misdirected.

Furthermore, despite their agreement on the importance of self-creation, Foucault and Rorty hold conflicting views on the scope and relevance of its practice in relation to questions of justice, politics, and social solidarity. While Foucault endorsed the aesthetics of existence as having the potential to infuse our relations with others with greater care and concern, Rorty sides with Foucault's critics in finding that the ethic of self-fashioning is, at best, irrelevant to our relations with one another and, at worst, downright dangerous, which leads him to recommend that its practice be confined to solitary activities in private life. Therefore, I treat Rorty as an implicit interlocutor of Foucault's on the question of the social and political implications of the ethics of

5. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 23-69.

self-fashioning. Like Foucault's non-liberal critics, Rorty limits the form that the ethics of self-fashioning can take to one obviously anti-social one. One can, however, as the present essay tries to show, take care of oneself in the Foucauldian sense without disregarding others. Indeed, under certain circumstances, one cannot properly and humanely attend to others *without* having attended to oneself in this way first.

I. Foucault on the Aesthetics of Existence

Contrary to the prevailing view that Foucault's later work on ethics constitutes a break from his genealogical and archaeological past, I would argue that one cannot account for the former without first returning to the latter. Inspired by Nietzsche, his various archaeological and genealogical studies attempt to show that "there is 'something altogether different' behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence has been fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms."⁶ "The world we know," he continues, "is not this ultimately simple configuration where events are reduced to accentuate their essential traits, [. . .] On the contrary, it is a profusion of entangled events."⁷ So it goes for the concept of human nature: "nothing in man—not even his body—is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition."⁸ In the wake of this "death of Man," we are faced with the challenge of exercising our freedom and fashioning our shared forms of life in the absence of the touchstones previously supplied by humanism and other faiths.

Without overlooking the risks of such a predicament, Foucault tended to stress the opportunities for new forms of freedom and creativity afforded by it. Indeed, in spite of his own archaeological and genealogical writings documenting the degree to which what we have become—the things that we think, say, and do in the present—is contingent upon a host of underlying epistemic and strategic conditions of possibility, Foucault argued that people are nonetheless "much freer than they feel."⁹ While there is little doubting that our contemporary forms of thought and practice have been *made*, produced that is on the basis of a web of contingent relations and events of which we are often only dimly aware, nevertheless "they can be unmade, as long as we know how it was they were made."¹⁰ As the successor to philosophy, genealogical inquiry will seek to "break down, to disassemble, the unity of the apparently self-evident concepts from which philosophers and social scien-

6. Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 142.

7. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 155.

8. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 153.

9. Michel Foucault, "Truth, Power, Self," interview in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar With Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick Hutton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 10.

10. Michel Foucault, "Critical Theory/Intellectual History," interview in Michel Foucault, *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, ed. Lawrence Kritzman (London: Routledge, 1988), 37.

tists generally begin” in order to reveal that they are “products that have within themselves a certain heterogeneity.”¹¹ As individuals, meanwhile, we must face up to the task of producing ourselves. “From the idea that the self is not given to us,” Foucault argued, “I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art.”¹² To this slackening in the order of the necessities once imposed on us by concepts like human nature and universal morality, “one responds, or must respond, with research which is that of an aesthetics of existence.”¹³ Under the circumstances, for Foucault, the paradigmatic individual takes the shape of a figure like Baudelaire, for whom “modern man [. . .] is not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secrets, his hidden truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself.”¹⁴ Foucault saw this creative work done on the self by the self as a kind of ethical practice, one which he explored in the final two published volumes of his history of sexuality, *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*, as well as other late writings and interviews. Together, then, the pursuit of genealogical criticism and the art of the self form the complementary philosophical and ethical elements of Foucault’s posthumanist “critical ontology of ourselves,” which he equated with the kind of *ethos* most appropriate to our times, one 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.”¹⁵

Reaction to Foucault’s late ethical writings from critics and commentators was swift and largely negative. Jürgen Habermas registered ethical concerns about Foucault’s putative affinities with the “aesthetic modernism” of “nihilistic *dark* writers of the bourgeoisie” like Nietzsche, which he equates with irrationalism, nihilism, and amoralism.¹⁶ Richard Wolin and Allan Megill assimilated Foucault’s work to Nietzsche’s “pan-aestheticism,” in which the notion of the aesthetic as a separate and autonomous sphere of activity is rejected in favor of aestheticizing the whole of existence.¹⁷ According to Wolin, dedifferentiating aesthetic and ethical experience leads necessarily to “aesthetic decisionism,” the tendency to aestheticize and instrumentalize others as mere material for one’s own self-fashioning, with disturbing implications for human empathy, mutuality, and solidarity.¹⁸ The pan-aestheticist position, he claims, gives *carte blanche* to “forms of life that are manipulative and preda-

11. Quoted in Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy, eds., *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1987), 96.

12. Quoted in Wolin, *The Terms of Cultural Criticism*, 191.

13. Michel Foucault, “An Aesthetics of Existence,” interview in Michel Foucault, *Foucault Live: Interviews 1966-1984*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989), 311.

14. Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?,” in Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 312.

15. Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?,” 319.

16. Jürgen Habermas, “The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Re-reading *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,” *New German Critique*, 26 (Spring-Summer 1982): 13, 23-28. Emphasis in original.

17. See: Wolin, “Foucault’s Aesthetic Decisionism,” 73-74; and Megill, *Prophets of Extremity*, 2-4.

18. Wolin, “Foucault’s Aesthetic Decisionism,” 71-86; and Wolin, *The Terms of Cultural Criticism*, 192.

tory.”¹⁹ Thus, Foucault’s ethics of self-fashioning “favors either an attitude of narcissistic self-absorption or one of outwardly directed, aggressive self-aggrandizement.”²⁰ Similarly, Martin Jay has warned that Nietzschean preoccupations with self-fashioning recall “the elite and narcissistic world of the nineteenth-century dandy, who deliberately rejected the telos of a natural self in favor of a life of contrived artifice, and did so with minimal regard for its impact on others.”²¹ Many feminist commentators worried about the implicit androcentrism of Foucault’s emphasis on the dangers of identity formation and subsequent interest in practices of the self oriented toward self-erasure. Jana Sawicki has argued, for example, that such interest “can all too easily become the basis for repudiating women’s struggles to attain a sense of identity not defined by patriarchal interests.”²² Finally, Charles Taylor saw in Foucault’s late interest in self-fashioning a disturbing celebration of an “unrestrained, utterly self-related freedom.”²³ Ultimately, his critics warn, by aestheticizing ethics and turning inward to the care of the self, Foucault risked endorsing the callous, self-absorbed and potentially violent stance of the “aesthetic modernist,” thereby undermining claims for human mutuality, respect, or concern for others.

As compelling as some concerns regarding the normative implications of Foucault’s work appear, however, much of the critical discussion of his ethics of self-fashioning seems to me quite wide of the mark. While each of these critics rightly warns of the dangers of a certain highly imperious and narcissistic mode of self-fashioning, a comparison of such a mode with Foucault’s aesthetics of existence reveals little resemblance between them. Rather than endorsing the kind of callous, self-absorbed, and self-aggrandizing mode of self-fashioning about which his critics worry, a careful reading of Foucault’s writings and comments on the art of the self shows that they call for practices which reveal the contingency and fragility of the self as a product of a web of contingent events and relationships, and promote cautious, piecemeal experimentation with transforming inherited identities, vocabularies, and forms of life whose maintenance and defense inflict gratuitous suffering and cruelty. Rather than promoting callous aestheticism and indifference to others, I suggest, such an art of the *contingent* self heightens our awareness of the contingencies and differences cross-cutting all identities, thereby helping militate against the indifference, resentment, and cruelty toward others which sometimes flow from aggressive attempts to universalize, glorify, and defend them.²⁴ In order to see this, however, we need to take a closer look at the model of self-fashioning Foucault proposed.

19. Wolin, “Foucault’s Aesthetic Decisionism,” 84.

20. Wolin, “Foucault’s Aesthetic Decisionism,” 85.

21. Jay, “The Morals of Genealogy,” 45.

22. Jana Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power, and the Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 105.

23. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 489.

24. Here my argument is indebted in part to William Connolly’s work on Foucault in, for example, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

Foucault's late interest in models of ethical self-fashioning was sparked by, *inter alia*, his encounter with the care of the self practiced by the ancient Greeks. By the early 1980s, Foucault turned to questions of a personal ethics of existence in response, he said, to the waning of "the idea of a morality as obedience to a code of rules."²⁵ The Greco-Roman ethics of the care of the self entailed a relation to the self as an object of one's own ethical self-fashioning, and a set of quasi-spiritual exercises through which one worked on oneself in order to fashion or transform oneself into an ethical subject, a work of art or object of beauty, to be admired by others, oneself, or posterity.²⁶ According to Foucault, it was this ethic of the care of the self which Christianity eventually displaced with the concept of moral behavior as adherence to a universal code of conduct. Prior to the universalization of the Christian code of morality, Foucault argues, ethical behavior was comprised of a series of deliberate, carefully modulated practices in which the individual engaged in order to work on, adjust, moderate, or exhibit certain aspects of the self. Such practices varied from Socrates' philosophical care of his own soul to Stoic exercises such as daily journal-writing. To the extent that the Christian code of universal morality is today in question, Foucault argued, the ethics of the care of the self appears once more on the horizon of possibilities for alternative approaches to ethical conduct; without, we should add, entertaining romantic illusions about the quality of life in antiquity, for women and slaves especially, or expecting that such codes of morality will ever entirely disappear.²⁷

Foucault held out as examples of possible contemporary technologies of the self the practices of genealogical inquiry, writing, and sex. For an intellectual in an age of warranted suspicion with respect to received foundations, identities, and universals, the ethic of the care of the self demands that one engage in practices which disturb, render less comfortable, and detach oneself from what one thinks. "What can the ethics of an intellectual be," Foucault insisted, "if not ['detaching yourself from yourself']: to render oneself permanently capable of self-detachment."²⁸ Intellectual work constitutes a certain care or practice of the self in which one undertakes to think something *other* than what one has thought before. Foucault ranked genealogical inquiry among the most potent technologies of the self. As a practice of the self, genealogical inquiry helps us to "separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think."²⁹ Genealogical analyses of history not only destabilize identities, thereby revealing the lack of necessity at the root of things, but produce disso-

25. Foucault, "An Aesthetics of Existence," 311.

26. See: Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1986), 39-68; and Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," interview in Foucault, *Ethics*, 281-301.

27. Foucault, "An Aesthetics of Existence," 311.

28. Michel Foucault, "The Concern for Truth," interview in Foucault, *Foucault Live*, 303.

29. Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," 315-16.

ciative effects on the practitioner of genealogy as well. The purpose of genealogical research, "is not to discover the roots of our identity but to commit to its dissipation [. . .] to make visible all of those discontinuities that cross us."³⁰ The dissociating and desubjectivizing experience of contingency within oneself erodes the sense of necessity attached to what one is and creates a space for experimentation.

In the 1960s, Foucault had also explored the possibilities of *avant garde* writing for the transformation and outright effacement of the self, inspired by literary figures like Blanchot, Bataille, Klossowski, and Roussel.³¹ For these authors, writing constituted a practice which, with respect to identity and subjectivity, entailed a certain degree of risk. Upon embarking on a new project, the writer ventures to transform not only the thinking of others, but his or her own as well. "Someone who is a writer," Foucault argued, "is not simply doing his work in his books, [. . .] his major work is, in the end, himself in the process of writing his books."³² The aesthetics of existence demands that one continuously risk oneself and one's thinking in practices such as writing. Foucault himself was an enthusiast of such literary risk-taking as a practice of the self. "I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face," he declared in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*; "Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same."³³

Apart from genealogical research and writing, Foucault also identified sex as a field for practices consistent with the ethics of self-fashioning. In sexual relations Foucault endorsed, *inter alia*, experimentation with ways of creating new forms of pleasure which heighten and multiply its dissociative and desubjectivizing effects.³⁴ In his practice of S/M, for example, Foucault experimented with and risked a certain self-effacement.³⁵ A desire to experiment with identity and non-identity also explains the appeal of anonymous bath-house sex, where "you stop being imprisoned inside your own face, your own past, your own identity," and in which "it's not the assertion of identity that's important; it's the assertion of non-identity."³⁶ In general, Foucault's queer ethics and politics called not for a celebration of gayness as a code of existence but demanded, rather, the pursuit of "relationships of differentiation, of creation, of innovation."³⁷ For those uncomfortable with the implication that they

30. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 162.

31. See: Michel Foucault, "Maurice Blanchot: The Thought From Outside," in Maurice Blanchot and Michel Foucault, *Foucault/Blanchot*, trans. Brian Massumi and Jeffrey Mehman (New York: Urzone, 1987), 9-58; Michel Foucault, "Language to Infinity," in Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, and Practice*, 53-67; and Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?," in Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, and Practice*, 113-38.

32. Quoted in David Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault* (London: Vintage, 1993), xiii.

33. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, (London: Tavistock, 1972), 17.

34. Michel Foucault, "Michel Foucault: An Interview With Stephen Riggins," interview in Foucault, *Ethics*, 129.

35. Michel Foucault, "Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity," interview in Foucault, *Ethics*, 164-70.

36. Quoted in Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault*, xv.

37. Foucault, "Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity," 166.

ought to practice S/M in order to constitute themselves as ethical subjects in Foucault's sense of the term, it warrants noting that he did not insist on universalizing his own particular set of practices of the self. Cultivating self-detachment depends primarily on seeking out experiences which remove us from our habitual centers of gravity, thereby revealing the "cultural unconscious" on which our current practices, habits of thought, and limits depend. Any trip away from the self, literally and figuratively speaking, helps cultivate the sense of contingency consistent with Foucault's ethic of the care of the self. Foucault once suggested that foreign travel and immersion in other cultures, for example, might produce effects of self-detachment similar to those he sought through genealogy, writing, and sex.³⁸

From these examples of Foucault's own attempts to engage in an aesthetics of existence one can see how his ethics of self-fashioning takes the form of a relationship to one's *self* that is ever cognizant of its fragility and contingency, and in which one seeks one's own self-overcoming. In relation to his work in general, such an ethics of the care of the self *follows* from an acknowledgement of the contingency of identities and subject positions revealed in his genealogical studies. By revealing the artifice, contingency, and web of relations lying behind every identity, including one's own, Foucault's genealogies weaken the sense of necessity and inevitability attached to what we are, think, and do, thereby opening up a space for experimentation with new identities and social relations. Foucault's contemporary take on the art of the self entails a certain kind of care of the *contingent* self, one which demands that one engage in practices of the self which both reveal the conditions under which one's identity has been produced and make possible one's self-transformation. Whatever one might make of Foucault's own idiosyncratic approach to self-fashioning, this hardly seems like the strategy of the self-aggrandizing aesthete about which Foucault's critics worry. Critics like Wolin are blind to the distinction because they tend to collapse all possible modes of self-fashioning into one monolithic form of aestheticist self-absorption and cruelty. This is entirely unwarranted. The callous, self-aggrandizing aestheticism which Wolin and others rightly warn us against constitutes only one model of self-fashioning among a range of possibilities, and one that is quite distinct from the model endorsed by Foucault. By examining another model of self-creation, such as that recently expounded by Richard Rorty, we can better dramatize the differences between the models of self-creation which Foucault, on one hand, and his critics, on the other, have in mind.

II. Rorty on Strong Poetry

Foucault's work calls for comparison with Richard Rorty's not least because of the latter's celebration of what he calls, after Harold Bloom, the figure of the "strong poet," embodied in such paradigmatic self-fashioners as Proust, Baudelaire, and

38. Michel Foucault, "Rituals of Exclusion," interview in Foucault, *Foucault Live*, 71-72.

Nietzsche. Rorty also shares what he calls Foucault's "ironism," or his sense of the contingency of all that we have inherited as fixed and given in the world, including our language, social practices and institutions, moral vocabulary, and sense of ourselves *qua* selves. "The ironist," Rorty writes, "is a nominalist and a historicist. She thinks nothing has an intrinsic nature, a real essence."³⁹ Rorty, too, rejects the notion of human nature, the belief in some "deep self" as a reservoir of characteristics shared by all human beings. We are what the historical, cultural, and social determinations bearing down upon us have made us into. This has become increasingly evident thanks to the work of ironist thinkers like Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, and Foucault. According to Rorty, in the wake of this progressive ironization of knowledge, identity, and morality we are faced with two tasks. If we are not to lapse into conformism, or what Rorty calls "the freezing-over of culture,"⁴⁰ then we must take up the existential task of producing or creating ourselves, that is, of pursuing a form of existence and identity that is as *autonomous* as possible from the vocabularies, identities, and practices we have inherited. In other words, we must take up the ethic of self-fashioning. On the other hand, Rorty argues, if we are to avoid lapsing into barbaric and cruel forms of social organization and practice, we must attend to the communitarian project of cultivating the sense of affiliation, solidarity, and obligation necessary to bind us to our fellow human beings. Rorty calls this communitarian project the ethic of mutual recognition and accommodation. While we must pay heed to both the urge to autonomy as well as our obligations to others, however, Rorty also sees an irreconcilable tension between the two, as we will see.

According to Rorty, while we all seek to be the "authors" of our own lives to some degree, throughout history some have felt the urgency of the task of self-creation more acutely than others. Such individuals—romantic poets, philosophers, scientific geniuses, and political revolutionaries—are compelled to create whole new vocabularies, metaphors, and forms of life by the urge to *disaffiliate* from inherited and conventional ways of seeing, saying, and doing things. Rorty calls such figures "strong poets," and sees them as exemplars of the ethic of autonomy and self-fashioning who, in the process of creating themselves as the originators of new ways of seeing, describing, and doing things, furnish the rest of us with new vocabularies, metaphors, and practices by which to understand and create ourselves.⁴¹ According to Rorty, the model of self-creation adopted by the strong poet is informed by a peculiar set of fears and imperatives. The strong poet is racked by what Harold Bloom has called "the anxiety of influence," or the "horror of finding himself to be only a copy or a replica."⁴² His is a fear of failing to create anything new in the world, new words,

39. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 74.

40. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 377.

41. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 29-43.

42. Bloom is quoted in Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 24.

or a new language, and of failing to establish a unique “I” against the “blind impress” of history and the inherited vocabularies and practices of his culture and society.⁴³ The strong poet’s view of personal as well as aesthetic failure consists in accepting someone else’s description of the world and himself, and in executing in life “a previously prepared program [. . .] elegant variations on previously written poems.”⁴⁴ As a result, the strong poet adopts an obsessive mode of self-relation in which he treats himself as an object of aesthetic manipulation. Success in strong poetry is marked by the individual’s ability to recognize himself as his own creation, to look back upon what he has become and say “thus I willed it.”⁴⁵ Rorty affirms the edifying potential of the kind of strong poetry practiced by ironist thinkers like Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger, which has the power to radically transform our cultural inheritance by furnishing us with whole new vocabularies and metaphors with which to understand and redescribe ourselves.

The strong poet’s model of self-fashioning, however, poses problems in terms of the question of social solidarity and concern for others. Almost inevitably, Rorty concedes, the obsessive nature of the strong poet’s struggle to compose a singular “life-poem” lends a callous imperiousness to her relations with others, to the point where the latter come to be perceived as little more than raw material for her own aesthetic self-perfection.⁴⁶ In this respect, she is capable of acts of the utmost cruelty. Along with Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger, Rorty’s gallery of strong poets is filled with a variety of “sensitive killers, cruel aesthetes, and pitiless poets,”⁴⁷ including such literary creations as Dickens’ Skimpole and Nabokov’s Humbert Humbert. We shall examine momentarily how Rorty attempts to reconcile the obvious tension between his enthusiasm for the strong poet’s ethic of self-creation and his more communitarian concern for cultivating fellow-feeling and avoiding cruelty. First, let us take note of the differences between the model of self-fashioning embodied in the practice of strong poetry and that entailed in Foucault’s aesthetics of existence.

While each model treats the subject as the object of its own aesthetic and ethical work, there is a considerable gap between them. This gap is opened up by the imperious, self-transcendentalizing ambition of the strong poet versus the self-reflexive practice of embracing the contingencies of selfhood and working to become something *other than what one is* at the centre of Foucault’s aesthetics of existence. Whereas the strong poet seeks to transcend the “blind impress” of conditions frustrating his or her ambition to create a unique and *glorious* self, the practitioner of the Foucauldian art of the self engages in practices which reveal the contingency and lack of necessity at the root of the self and its identity, thereby promoting the desub-

43. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 23-25.

44. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 28.

45. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 29.

46. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 159.

47. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 157.

jectivization, destabilization, and even *effacement* of the self. Whereas the strong poet is motivated by an elitist and romantic urge to disaffiliate altogether from the discourse and practice of his predecessors, the practitioner of the aesthetics of existence traces in meticulous detail his dependence *upon* them, as a necessary condition of critical detachment from what he has become *through* them, in the interest of carving out a space in which to invent practices and forms of life free from the pressure to automatically conform with them, and which others might take up as well.

The gap between strong poetry and the aesthetics of existence widens even further when we examine these modes of self-fashioning in relation to the question of ethical responsiveness to others. Insofar as strong poetry harbors an inherent capacity for incuriosity and cruelty in relation to others, as we saw, Rorty recommends that its practice be strictly limited to the edifying activities of the individual in private life, such as reading or writing ironist theory. Nothing in the model of self-fashioning expounded by Foucault, however, explicitly sanctions or underwrites the kind of wanton manipulation and abuse of others to which the strong poet is prone. The double imperative of recognizing oneself as a product of a web of relations and contingent events, and of remaining open to self-transformation, militates against the imperiousness and cruelty inherent in the strong poet's project of self-transcendentalization. The strong poet's drive to consolidate and glorify his identity, even at the expense of others, is incompatible with the kind of ontological awareness of the lack of necessity underlying all identities, including one's own, cultivated by the Foucauldian care of the contingent self. Practices like genealogical criticism which enhance appreciation of our own contingency may well guard against the potential for cruelty inherent in drives to transcendentalize identity or universalize morality.⁴⁸ I will take up and expand this argument farther below. For now it seems clear Foucault offers us a model of self-fashioning which, in comparison to strong poetry at least, contains no explicit invitation to the kind of violence and cruelty feared by his critics.

Before presenting the remainder of the case for Foucault's ethics of self-fashioning, however, the differences between the two models of self-fashioning developed here can be underscored by referring to the case of Pierre Rivière, the nineteenth-century French parricide who was the subject of a minor work by Foucault. The case is pertinent for a number of reasons. Firstly, it involves an aesthetically motivated violent crime. Rivière carried out his crime according to the imperatives of a certain project of aesthetic self-fashioning, as we shall see. As such, the case allows us to examine more concretely the relationship between models of self-fashioning and care and concern for others. Secondly, it provides an occasion to challenge the widespread caricature of Foucault as glorifying the violence and cruelty of figures like Rivière. There is no shortage of critics who have suggested that such crimes are more or less consistent with the principles of Foucault's aesthetics of existence. Yet,

48. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization*, 70.

when Rivière's case is examined in light of the respective models of self-fashioning discussed above, it becomes clear that, far from a model for the aesthetics of existence, Rivière bears much closer resemblance to Rorty's strong poet.

III. Pierre Rivière's Strong Poetry

According to the documents collected and edited by Foucault as, *I, Pierre Rivière, having slaughtered my mother, my sister, and my brother. . .*,⁴⁹ a French peasant, Pierre Rivière, confessed to the murders of his pregnant mother, sister, and younger brother in 1835. During his interrogation, Rivière produced a memoir explaining the facts leading up to, as well as the reasons behind, his crime. The ostensible motive of Rivière's attack was to relieve his father of the burden of his allegedly malicious and vindictive spouse. His sister, Rivière rationalized, was allied to his mother's cause and had therefore to be condemned as well. As for his younger brother, whom he knew to be his father's favorite, Rivière reasoned that by killing him, his father's anger would be brought upon himself, and that thus he would not be mourned by his father after his own inevitable execution. Rivière expected, indeed eagerly anticipated, a speedy execution. Instead, however, his case became the focal point of a conflict between the legal profession and the emerging medical specialty of psychiatry. The debate over Rivière's guilt dragged on for five years before the psychiatric profession finally succeeded in having his sentence commuted to life imprisonment.

The Rivière case is of interest to us here because of its aesthetic dimensions. Firstly, the murders were the culmination of Rivière's lifelong attempt to distinguish himself, or, as he explained in his memoir, "make some noise in the world."⁵⁰ By murdering his mother and sister Rivière sought to transform himself into his father's savior. Moreover, by murdering his younger brother, Rivière ensured that, in spite of his sacrifice, he himself would not be mourned. Indeed, by denying himself the satisfaction of being fondly remembered by his father, Rivière's sacrifice is double. And yet, this whole tragic scene and disturbing rationalization emerged out of Rivière's self-creative bid to transcend the banality and frustration of his existence on the margins of French society in one theatrically violent grand gesture. "I thought," he wrote:

that an opportunity had come for me to raise myself, that my name would make some noise in the world, that by my death I should cover myself with glory [. . .], Thus I took my fatal decision.⁵¹

49. Michel Foucault, ed., *I, Pierre Rivière, having slaughtered my mother, my sister, and my brother...* (New York: Random House, 1975)

50. Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, 108.

51. Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, 108.

Rivière's self-creative urge was doubly satisfied by the narrative re-creation of his crime in the justificatory memoir he composed in prison. The same aesthetic compulsion which led him to murder his family demanded the crime's re-enactment, glorification, and immortalization in writing.

On the face of it, this tragic scenario appears to confirm the fears of those critical of the ethics of self-fashioning. Just as Foucault's critics warned, an aestheticist ethic of self-creation led Rivière to commit acts of brutality against others whom he was incapable of seeing as anything other than fodder for his own project of aesthetic self-perfection and transcendence. However, while he clearly pursued a program of self-fashioning which led to acts of extreme violence, his program bears little resemblance to Foucault's aesthetics of existence as expounded above. Rivière's case confirms the violent and anti-social tendencies embedded within only *one* model of self-fashioning. In my view, the model adopted by Rivière is strikingly similar to strong poetry.

Rivière meets many if not all of Rorty's criteria for establishing the credentials of a strong poet. Rivière was clearly afflicted by the strong poet's "anxiety of influence". According to his memoir, Rivière's thoughts were filled with visions of glory and notoriety: "I had ideas of glory, [. . .] I was consumed by ideas of greatness and immortality, [. . .] I was always preoccupied with my excellence."⁵² He evinced a strong ambition to raise himself above his condition, and harbored a burning desire to invent new things and new words.⁵³ Of course, his ultimate creations were himself, as the glorious "savior" of his father, and his memoir, a text which, thanks to Foucault, proved to be his most potent weapon for dislodging himself from the margins of history.⁵⁴

No strong poet, Rorty tells us, can resist the compulsion to demonstrate, display and test his or her distinctiveness in writing and in deed. Rivière was no exception. Rivière could not achieve glory as the "savior" of his father without eliminating his mother. Then, facing obscurity in prison, he continued to pursue his project of singularity and transcendence by inventing and redescribing himself in writing. The strong poet, Rorty tells us, defines failure in life as the acceptance of someone else's description of the world and of oneself, which is to live life according to a "poem" one has not composed for oneself. In his prison writings, Rivière vigorously resisted medical descriptions of himself as a "madman" and relished the opportunity to stand before the courts and the public, "to have thoughts opposed to all my judges, to dispute against the whole world."⁵⁵

Finally, Rivière's strong poetry is confirmed by his display of cruelty and indiffer-

52. Foucault, *J, Pierre Rivière*, 101-103.

53. Foucault, *J, Pierre Rivière*, 103.

54. Jean Pierre Peter and Jeanne Favret, "The Animal, the Madman, and Death," in Foucault, *J, Pierre Rivière*, 198.

55. Foucault, *J, Pierre Rivière*, 108.

ence to the suffering of those around him. The obsessive strong poet not only fails to notice how her pursuits might be affecting others but opts at times to objectify and instrumentalize others, subsuming them under the personal imperatives of her own project of transcendence.⁵⁶ The intensity of Rivière's obsession with covering himself with glory propelled him toward his final decision to kill. Far from viewing his family members as ends in themselves, Rivière objectified and instrumentalized them into mere material for his own aesthetic gratification.

In Rivière's case, then, we see how a combination of the strong poet's anxiety of influence, need to dramatize and transcendentalize his identity, and tendency to view the world in aesthetic terms makes him capable of alarming acts of violence and cruelty. The strong poetry of individuals like Rivière shows us that certain models of self-fashioning *can* underwrite acts of disturbing violence and cruelty. According to Richard Wolin, such a model of self-fashioning inevitably leads to behavior that is manipulative and predatory:

If I view other persons primarily in aesthetic terms [...] I philosophically underwrite their wanton manipulation: they become in effect material for my own personal aesthetic gratification; they are degraded to the status of bit players in the drama of my own private aesthetic spectacle.⁵⁷

Be that as it may, the Rivière case fails to confirm the potential for violence and cruelty alleged to inhere in the model of self-fashioning endorsed by Foucault. When critics claim that Foucault's ethics of self-creation underwrites forms of life which are manipulative and predatory, the model of self-fashioning they seem to have in mind has much more in common with that of the strong poet. This seems clear from the following passage from one of Wolin's essays on Foucault:

instead of an ethic of reciprocity or brotherliness, Foucault opts for what we might call a dramaturgical model of conduct, in which action becomes meaningful solely *qua* performative gesture. But this theory risks sanctioning an approach to ethics that is brazenly particularistic and elitist. Formally, it remains only a hair's breadth removed from Nietzsche's rehabilitation of the right of the stronger.⁵⁸

When Wolin voices concerns here about the ethical implications of a model of self-fashioning which privileges the criteria of beauty or glory, however, the model he has in mind is strong poetry rather than the aesthetics of existence. As the comparison of the aesthetics of existence and strong poetry above made clear, there is a significant gap between the two models. The model of strong poetry exemplified by

56. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 157-58.

57. Wolin, *The Terms of Cultural Criticism*, 192.

58. Wolin, *The Terms of Cultural Criticism*, 193.

Rivière is prone to an insensitive imperiousness and obsessive preoccupation with the self's glorification and transcendentalization. The strong poet strives to leave a lasting, distinctive, and singular mark indicative of the extraordinariness of his identity. It is in precisely the imperiousness and self-transcendentalizing ambition he harbored, however, that Rivière can be said clearly *not* to have been engaged in the kind of critical and reflexive aesthetics of existence endorsed by Foucault.

Contrary to the imperious indifference and transcendental obsessions of the strong poet, the practitioner of the aesthetics of existence is committed to continuous self-detachment and self-overcoming via the care of the contingent self. Foucault's model of self-creation demands the subject's continual scrutiny of and experimentation on itself. Unlike the strong poet's bid for transcendence, which cultivates an identity which is both glorious and *terminal*, the practitioner of the aesthetics of existence continually explores the contingent relations and events by which she has become what she is, as well as the possibilities for *becoming something else*. Adherence to Foucault's aesthetics of the self requires that one acknowledge the contingencies, accidents, and web of relations and events that have made one what one has become, and eschew efforts to consolidate and freeze one's identity around some idealized, naturalized, terminal self-sameness. Finally, the cruel indifference of the strong poet is invited by the aestheticization of *others* as merely contingent artifacts and material. On the other hand, the practitioner of the aesthetics of existence may become so attuned to the contingency and constructedness of the *self* that any effort to transcendentalize her identity, particularly at the expense of others, would conflict with her ontological awareness of her own contingency and fragility as a subject. The imperious and callous nature by which Rivière pursued his own aesthetic self-fashioning stemmed largely from the ambition he harbored for recognition, glory, and transcendence. In the aesthetics of existence Foucault wagers such tendencies would be weakened, if not altogether neutralized, by the acknowledgement of the contingency and instability of *all* identities, including one's own.

In the preceding comparison, then, one is hard-pressed to find anything in Foucault's aesthetics of existence that underwrites or sanctions the kind of cruelty and indifference toward others exhibited by figures like Rivière. In my view, the predatory Nietzschean most feared by Foucault's critics is actually Rorty's strong poet. As a result, the concerns of critics like Wolin, Jay, and Megill, among others, seem rather misdirected. There is an interesting irony here. While Rorty's pragmatist defense of American liberal democracy has garnered its share of detractors, including Wolin himself, his celebration of strong poetry has barely been remarked upon.⁵⁹ In the final section of this essay, I take up the broader question of the relationship between the ethics of self-fashioning and the communitarian concern for our relationships with others. As we saw above, Rorty suggests that these two con-

59. John Lysaker notes this silence in, "The shape of selves to come: Rorty on self-creation," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 22 (1996): 39-74.

cerns embody competing and irreconcilable logics and priorities. I want to suggest, however, that Foucault's work on the aesthetics of existence reveals a way to bridge this alleged gap between self-creation and solidarity.

IV. Care of the Self and Care for Others

The belief that, like strong poetry, Foucault's ethics of the care of the self precludes the possibility of care or concern for others is based on the view that all forms of the ethic of self-fashioning are intrinsically hostile to what Rorty calls the communitarian ethic of mutual recognition and accommodation. Rorty shares with Foucault's non-liberal critics the view that the ethic of self-fashioning is irreconcilable with our duties to others, which explains why his celebration of strong poetry has received much less critical attention. Tied up with the ethic of self-fashioning, Rorty claims, is an inherently elitist and anti-social impulse to *disaffiliate* from and to disparage the community and its inherited vocabularies and practices.⁶⁰ It would be a grave mistake, therefore, to think that by adhering to the ethic of self-fashioning one somehow contributes to communal solidarity or the social good. On the contrary, any attempt to infuse our social relations or public lives with the strong poet's irony and ethic of self-creation in all likelihood would lead to disaster. If the strong poet were to become involved in public life, for example, she would find it almost impossible to resist what Nancy Fraser has called the "Sorelian temptation" to treat the community as mere material for her own aesthetic self-perfection, that is, "as an empty canvas awaiting the unfettered designs of the poet-leader."⁶¹ We run the risk of such a Sorelian nightmare, Rorty argues, when we infuse our public lives with the essentially private ethic of self-fashioning.

For his part, Rorty attempts to resolve the obvious tension between his admiration for the strong poet's creative genius and his own acknowledgement of the dangers inherent in her search for autonomy and transcendence by recommending his eminently liberal "partition solution". Given that the practice of strong poetry is noxious to intersubjective relations and irrelevant, at best, to our public lives, Rorty recommends that it be confined to our private lives, to our relations with ourselves.⁶² In our public discourses, meanwhile, we should strive to cultivate the communitarian ethic of mutual recognition and accommodation by adopting an "ethnocentric" attachment to discourses and practices promoting freedom, tolerance, and the avoidance of cruelty. The only way that Rorty sees, then, to preserve the equally worthy goals of self-creation and solidarity is to consign their pursuit to what he sees as the two separate and hermetically sealed spheres of private and public life.

60. Richard Rorty, "Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity," in *Habermas and Modernity*, ed. Richard Bernstein (Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 1985), 172-75.

61. Fraser, *Unruly Practices*, 96.

62. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 83.

Rorty's attempt to privatize self-creation is important for our purposes because it not only throws into relief a key source of disagreement with Foucault, but also signals a break from those critics of Foucault with whom Rorty has thus far been allied. Not surprisingly, Fraser, Wolin, and McCarthy have chastised Rorty for relying on the widely discredited liberal distinction between public and private.⁶³ These latter arguments take us to the heart of Foucault's disagreement with Rorty, and make for some interesting bedfellows as well. Thus far, Rorty has been allied with Foucault's critics on the question of the tendencies toward cruelty allegedly inherent in the ethic of self-creation. Rorty, however, tries to preserve the edifying effects of self-creation by erecting a wall between the private pursuit of self-creation and the public pursuit of mutual care and concern, a wall which thinkers like Fraser argue cannot be maintained. In other words, while they differ with Foucault on the question of the relationship between self-creation and cruelty, many of his leftist critics implicitly agree with him, *contra* Rorty, on the permeability of the boundary between the public and private, that is, on the inescapable connection between the kind of relationship we have with our *selves* and our relations with others. For thinkers like Fraser, McCarthy, and Wolin, the effects of self-creation will inevitably spill over into intersubjective and public life, albeit for the worse. This leads us to the final argument that I want to examine here. It was Foucault's contention that there is an inevitable connection between the relationship we have with ourselves and the relations we have with others, and that the mode of self-relation at the heart of the aesthetics of existence bridges the gap alleged to exist between self-creation and solidarity. Let us examine this contention in more detail.

In his writings on ethics, first of all, Foucault called attention to the relationship between the ethics of self-fashioning and care and concern for others by returning to the Ancients. For the ancient Greeks, the care of the self and care for others were intertwined; the former, which most often took the form of self-mastery, constituted an important prelude to the fulfillment of one's role as husband, father, mentor, lover, friend, master, and ruler, in which one engaged in the care of others. In *The Use of Pleasure* Foucault recalls Socrates' instruction to Alcibiades that the care of the self was "a precondition that had to met before one was qualified to attend to the affairs of others or lead them."⁶⁴ While Socrates admonished his fellow citizens to tend to themselves before they attend to the affairs of the city, this is by no means an invitation to neglect the latter. The care of the self is not only not incompatible with living in the city but, as Alexander Nehamas has recently argued, "will ultimately make both citizens and the city as a whole better."⁶⁵ Foucault also shows, in

63. See the following: Fraser, *Unruly Practices*, 93-110; McCarthy, *Ideals and Illusions*, 11-34; Wolin, *The Terms of Cultural Criticism*, 149-69.

64. Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 73.

65. Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections From Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 181.

both *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*, how various Stoic exercises and spirituals were related to the practitioner's social relations and public functions. Turning to the contemporary practice of the care of the self, Foucault was drawn to practices suggesting relationships between the care of the self and care for others similar to those evident in antiquity. Foucault's comments on sexual pleasure oscillate between enthusiasm for the dissociative and desubjectivizing effects of certain practices and interest in the production of identities, novel relationships, and affective ties which stem from them. Many of the practices endorsed by Foucault were intended to weaken and destabilize the experience of self and identity as something fixed, necessary, and transcendent; to show that our present experience of ourselves "is far from filling all possible spaces."⁶⁶ On the other hand, inventiveness in the field of sexuality also afforded opportunities for the formation of new identities, relations, and communities. Following the work of Gayle Rubin, for example, Foucault emphasized the extent to which gay and lesbian S/M afford new possibilities for relations of trust, mutuality, and community.⁶⁷ "The practice of S&M is the creation of pleasure, and there is an identity with that creation. And that's why S&M is really a subculture. It's a process of invention."⁶⁸ For Foucault, the question of his homosexuality was not "'Who am I' and 'What is the secret of my desire?'," but rather, "'What relations, through homosexuality, can be established, invented, multiplied, and modulated?'"⁶⁹ What interested him about homosexual desire was the opportunities it afforded for the invention of and experimentation with as yet untried relationships and affective ties with others outside heterosexist norms.⁷⁰ In Foucault's sexual aesthetics of existence, then, far from constituting a callous and ethically suspicious form of self-love and selfishness, the ethics of the care of the sexual self occasions rather than suppresses recognition of our obligations, relations, and responsibilities to others.

To the concern that this emphasis on practices of the self might lead to indifference and cruelty toward others Foucault responded that such danger was mitigated precisely by the nature of the care of the *contingent* self. Here he returned to the Ancients and, specifically, to their analysis of the tyrannical soul. For the ancient Greeks, he argued: "the risk of dominating others and exercising tyrannical power over them arises precisely only when one has *not* taken care of the self and has become the slave of one's desires."⁷¹ Today, according to Foucault, rather than mastering erotic impulses, taking proper care of the self involves disturbing the sense of necessity attached to hegemonic categories and identities by which one under-

66. Michel Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," interview in Foucault, *Ethics*, 140.

67. Foucault, "Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity," 170-73.

68. Foucault, "Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity," 169-70.

69. Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," 135.

70. Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," 136.

71. Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," 288. Emphasis added.

stands oneself. Failure to take care of ourselves in this sense, that is, when we are tempted to naturalize or transcendentalize what we have become relationally and contingently, more often than not produces the kind of domination and tyranny about which Foucault's critics worry. Such a practice of the care of the self entails cautious and mature work on the self which awakens one to the web of relations and contingent events which have contributed to what one has become, and fosters ethical responsiveness to others by militating against the urge to dominate which flows from attempts to glorify and transcendentalize one's identity.⁷²

Concerns about the ethical implications of Foucault's aesthetics of existence often stem from a misunderstanding of his attitude toward moral codes. The ethics of self-fashioning is routinely misinterpreted as utterly hostile to moral codes or any form of self-restraint. By stressing the strong poet's elitist urge to disaffiliate from all inherited vocabularies, moral codes, and practices, Rorty reinforces the idea that the art of the self is incommensurable with communal solidarity and fellow-feeling. Foucault's own views, however, reflect an acknowledgement of the inescapability of moral codes and systems of restraint. Returning to sexual conduct, for example, Foucault readily acknowledged that "there are sexual acts like rape which should not be permitted [. . .] I don't think we should have as our objective some sort of absolute freedom or total liberty of sexual action."⁷³ "The important point here," he continues,

is not whether a culture without systems of restraint is possible or even desirable but whether the system of constraints in which a society functions leaves individuals the liberty to transform the system. Obviously constraints of any kind are going to be intolerable to certain segments of society. But a system of constraint becomes truly intolerable when the individuals affected by it don't have the means of modifying it. [. . .] There is no question that a society without restrictions is inconceivable.⁷⁴

The ethics of the care of the self is intended as part of a whole ensemble of practices intended to expose and transform elements of such restrictions when they are found to be unnecessary or to impose gratuitous suffering, and not to overthrow restraint and restriction altogether.

Foucault's writings also reflect an understanding of the interdependence between practices of the self and the moral coding of conduct. Every morality, in the broad sense, he argued, comprises both "codes of behavior and forms of subjectivation," but certain of them, such as Christianity, emphasize the code aspects of morality whereas others, such as in the ethics of late-antiquity, can be found "in which the strong and dynamic element is to be sought in forms of subjectivation and the prac-

72. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization*, 65-74.

73. Michel Foucault, "Sexual Choice, Sexual Act," in Foucault, *Michel Foucault*, 289.

74. Foucault, "Sexual Choice, Sexual Act," 294-95.

tices of the self.”⁷⁵ The Christian code of morality, as Foucault points out, was always accompanied by certain practices of the self, even if they took the ascetic forms of self-disclosure, renunciation, and effacement.⁷⁶ Greco-Roman practices of the self, meanwhile, always took place within the context of a rudimentary set of moral conventions. In the contemporary context, one in which many aspects of the Christian code have lost their authority, Foucault was more inclined to dwell on the forms of subjectivation and the care of self. This need not be read as a total repudiation of code morality. Indeed, the interdependence Foucault detects between “forms of subjectivation” and “codes of behavior” suggests that the opposition Rorty poses between self-creation and public morality is a false one. Foucault’s ethics of self-fashioning offers one possible means by which to challenge congealed aspects of moral codes and the violence they can do, and to fill the void left by their recent ebb. That he elected not to endorse any concrete vision of a moral code or system of restraint superior to the present one certainly leaves him open to misunderstanding, but it seems clear that he recognized the inescapability of one. What he resisted above all was the will to impose a *universal* morality that would, in its very universality and self-evidentness, become so taken-for-granted and insulated from criticism as to be impermeable to change. Foucault always saw greater risk of harm in endorsing particular moral codes than in supplying the means of criticizing them all.⁷⁷ Notwithstanding his own desire to remain above the fray of competing positive programs, it seems clear he acknowledged that no society as a whole could afford not to risk affirming something. Foucault saw his place, as an intellectual, as one of providing the means—“a critical ontology of ourselves”—to ensure that this would be done with as little harm as possible.

At this point, when combined with the model of self-fashioning constructed above, a formula for an ethics of self-fashioning which simultaneously pays heed to the need for relations of care and concern for others begins to come into focus. The model for the care of the contingent self emphasizes practices which dislodge us from our habitual centers of gravity in order to reveal the contingencies lying behind every identity, including our own. Such practices not only place us in a position to discard old forms of life and social relations, especially those found to inflict gratuitous suffering, but create a space for experimenting with new ones. In addition, by calling attention to the contingencies which have made us what we are, such practices neutralize the temptation to glorify, universalize and transcendentalize what we have become, a temptation undeniably at the root of a good deal of violence and conflict today. Coupled with practices which occasion new forms of social relations and affective ties not limited to those discussed by Foucault, I think we can begin to see the out-

75. Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 29-30.

76. See, for example, Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” in Martin, et al., eds., *Technologies of the Self*, 16-49.

77. Foucault, “The Return of Morality,” in Foucault, *Foucault Live*, 330.

lines of a model of ethical self-fashioning worthy of much more serious consideration than his writings on the aesthetics of existence have been given thus far.

Finally, while endeavoring to defend Foucault's ethics from a variety of standard criticisms, I do not want to leave the impression that it is entirely risk free. I will conclude this essay with a brief consideration of what a few such risks might be. Serious reservations about the risks of Foucault's approach to ethics have been articulated by many feminist theorists, for example. Linda Alcoff and Jana Sawicki, among others, worry about the implications of adopting a relationship to oneself and one's identity in which one seeks self-*detachment* and even self-*erasure*.⁷⁸ They are right to point out the strategic importance of identity formation and consolidation to those engaged in various struggles against domination. Furthermore, Alcoff and Sawicki remind us to be wary of the elitism and androcentrism implicit in calls to retreat from the traditional field of political struggle and contestation in favor of devoting ourselves to practices of the self. Finally, thinkers representing a wide range of perspectives from conservatism to critical theory and feminism have pointed to the potential danger that self-detachment may lead not only to a diluted sense of self which one may be less inclined to defend when trespassed upon, but to very weak attachments to others as well. Alasdair MacIntyre, for example, has argued that Foucault's resistance to the notion of the self as identical and continuous with itself over time excludes the possibility of individuals being held accountable and responsible for their past words and deeds, including those which inflicted harm. Insofar as he or she continuously disavows his or her identity as continuous, the decentered subject "faces grave difficulties in constructing a narrative of his or her past which would allow any acknowledgement in that past for a failure, let alone a guilty failure."⁷⁹ These are serious concerns worthy of deeper reflection on the part of anyone interested in Foucauldian ethics. A careful reading of Foucault's work also supplies the beginnings of a response to them.

Firstly, while Foucault was certainly interested in certain forms of self-erasure, the aesthetics of existence encompasses a broad range of practices of which the former makes up only a small part. Indeed, his own injunction to excavate the voices and "subjugated knowledge" of those who have picked up the tab for Western civilization as we know it—including women—has been responsible in some small measure for the excavation, consolidation, and celebration of the kind of subjugated identities Alcoff and Sawicki affirm. Where Foucault parts company with them, perhaps, is in his insistence that "everything is dangerous" and his consequent refusal to pass over in silence the dangers accompanying *every* assertion of identity. The struggle within the feminist movement itself these last two decades to acknowledge and come to terms with its own exclusions suggests that Foucault's position is more

78. See: Alcoff, "Feminism and Foucault," 69-86; Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault*, 102-107

79. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 213.

prudent than reckless. Furthermore, recent Foucault-inspired work on “governmentality” by Barbara Cruickshank, for example, has revealed the extent to which tools of identity-formation such as consciousness-raising, empowerment, and self-esteem workshops, previously taken for granted by many feminists as more or less benign, are themselves implicated in strategies of liberal governance.⁸⁰ The emancipatory or non-repressive nature of identities, then, including those assumed in the course of struggle against domination, can never be taken for granted.

Foucault’s late interest in various practices of the self also raises concern that he endorsed an elitist retreat into the private world of the self and one’s identity at the expense of political engagement. But Foucault’s work was intended to challenge precisely this sort of equation of the arts of the self with selfishness and apoliticism. According to Foucault, the relationship one maintains with oneself and one’s identity—the extent to which one cultivates a critical and reflexive awareness of its largely constructed nature, or not—inevitably bears on one’s relations with others. Insisting on the apoliticism of the concern for self, and setting it up in opposition to solidarity and political engagement actually reproduces the liberal conceptual split between private and public, or self and society, which Foucault’s leftist and feminist critics otherwise reject. In any event, Foucault assumed that individuals would remain politically engaged and active in a conventional sense, as he was, and never intended that the ethics of self-fashioning would substitute for such.

Finally, the concern that Foucault’s ethics of self-fashioning might lead to an increasingly dilute and ironic sense of self with a weakened sense of attachment to and responsibility for others is more difficult to assuage. Foucault does appear to have a weakening and scattering of identities, vocabularies, and moralities as his objective. He also appears willing to tolerate the kind of collective pain and disorientation that accompanies ironic redescription of hegemonic identities and moralities at the hands of figures like Nietzsche, as an acceptable price for insuring against the cost of future moral universalisms. There is no shortage of critics willing to take stock of things on the former side of the ledger. To the extent that Foucault is correct, in that we have more to fear from the consolidation and universalization of identity and morality than we do from their ironic redescription and dispersal, then he leaves us well armed. Where he seems to fall short is in the supply of criteria for the conditions under which we ought to suspend our critical faculties and simply stand *for* ourselves as we are, as he seems to assume we will have to. Strategies of detachment may have some effect, as I have argued, in neutralizing certain less than attractive drives, but they are likely insufficient on their own to bind us to one another. One cannot, as even William Connolly acknowledges, “become detached as such”. “It is important,” he continues, “to articulate the ideal to which your strate-

80. Barbara Cruickshank, *The Will to Empower: Democratic Citizens and Other Subjects* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 67-103.

gies of critical detachment are attaching you.”⁸¹ Otherwise, the genealogy of morals is at risk of remaining, as MacIntyre charges, “derivative from and parasitic upon its antagonisms.”⁸² Foucault’s steadfast refusal to articulate such ideals, for fear of reproducing the very closure his methods were designed to resist, reflects the exaggerated sense of danger he attached to affirming as such. Given that we must ultimately *choose* our ideals and systems of restraint as well as render them open to transformation, it might have been more helpful had he offered some up for debate.

V. Conclusion

The preceding arguments have been offered as an intervention in the debate concerning the ethical and political implications of Foucault’s aesthetics of existence, and in a broader discussion of the relationship between the ethics of self-fashioning and the communitarian ethic of care and concern for others. Accusations that Foucault legitimizes aestheticist violence and cruelty mistake the model of self-fashioning he endorsed for one bearing much closer resemblance to Rorty’s strong poetry. As a result, much of this criticism fails to find its mark. Rather than a recipe for narcissism and indifference toward others, one can elucidate from Foucault’s thoughts on self-fashioning a formula for a mode of relating to the self as a product of contingent relations and events that is more benign than his critics allow. Foucault’s work also shows us how the nature of the relationship that we maintain with our selves and our inherited identities, vocabularies, and practices, is entwined with our relationships with those around us. The former cannot *but* spill over into our relationships with friends, family, fellow citizens, and political rivals. We can take care of ourselves in the Foucauldian sense without necessarily disregarding others; indeed, I would argue that we often cannot attend humanely and compassionately to others *without* attending to ourselves in this way first. I have tried to show, as well, why we cannot and need not follow Rorty’s liberal prescription of erecting a wall between the ethic of self-creation and the ethic of mutual recognition and accommodation. Foucault’s non-liberal critics, such as Nancy Fraser and Richard Wolin, are right that the ethic of self-creation has social implications no matter what form it takes. Where they part company with Foucault is in their inability to see how such an ethic might take *any* benign form whatsoever. In my view, these critics have, along with Rorty, been overly hasty in dismissing the ethics of self-fashioning as a fruitful path for ethical and political exploration in this increasingly ironic age. Foucault’s nascent views on the aesthetics of existence offer at least a glimpse of a mode of relating to ourselves which suggests that the alleged gap between self-creation and solidarity can be bridged after all.

81. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization*, 35.

82. MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry*, 215.