

**MORAL SUBJECTIVATION AND POWER: FOUCAULTIAN CONTRIBUTIONS
TO SOCIOLOGY OF MORALITY**

***SUBJETIVAÇÃO MORAL E PODER: CONTRIBUIÇÕES FOUCAULTIANAS PARA A
SOCIOLOGIA DA MORALIDADE***

***SUBJETIVACIÓN MORAL Y PODER: CONTRIBUCIONES FOUCAULTIANAS A LA
SOCIOLOGIA DE LA MORALIDADE***

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ABSTRACT: This paper discusses the theoretical and methodological systematization proposed by Michel Foucault to study morality. In order to extract lessons and subsidies for sociological research on moralities, especially to ground the notion of moral subjectivation, it is argued that late Foucaultian studies provide a praxeological perspective capable of connecting morality, agency, and power.

KEYWORDS: Michel Foucault. Morality. Subjectivation. Sociology of morality. Social theory.

RESUMO: *Este artigo discute a sistematização teórico-metodológica proposta por Michel Foucault para estudar a moral. Com intuito de extrair lições e subsídios para a pesquisa sociológica das moralidades, em especial para fundamentar a noção de subjetivação moral, sustenta-se que os estudos tardios foucaultianos aportam uma perspectiva praxiológica capaz de conectar moralidade, agência e poder.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Michel Foucault. Moralidade. Subjetivação. Sociologia da moral. Teoria Social.*

RESUMEN: *Este artículo discute la sistematización teórica y metodológica propuesta por Michel Foucault para estudiar la moral. Con el fin de extraer lecciones y subsidios para la investigación sociológica de la moralidad, especialmente para apoyar la noción de subjetivación moral, se argumenta que los últimos estudios foucaultianos proporcionan una perspectiva praxiológica capaz de conectar la moralidad, la agencia y el poder.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Michel Foucault. Moralidad. Subjetivación. Sociología de la moralidade. Teoría social.*

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Introduction

In addition to the temporal retreat to classical antiquity and the first centuries of Christianity, Michel Foucault's last works in the 1980s carry out a second and relevant movement. The French philosopher opens his “genealogy of the subject in Western civilization” towards a new path of human social practices (FOUCAULT, 2006a, p. 95), namely: morality.

The volumes following the *Vontade de saber*² (1988) stand out for this new and disturbing concern with the role of morality in the history of the modes of subjectivation and the forms of government created in Western societies. In his latest studies, Foucault is interested in understanding how sexual activity was constituted as a “moral problem” – a question, at first sight, peculiar, but with broad historical-political developments. About these studies on the moralities of pleasures, he writes: “If I were pretentious, I would call what I do: genealogy of morals” (FOUCAULT, 2006b, p. 174).

Therefore, the consecrated turn to the problem of subjectivity, which several specialists in Foucault's work underline, is closely linked to this sudden theoretical and empirical interest of the philosopher with the theme of morality. In Foucault, morality is thought of as a historical-cultural field of problematization³ of human conduct. As such, it can encompass different dimensions of human experience and, in this way, support different analytical levels for research work. His greatest interest, as will be seen in this article, lies with what the philosopher calls “ethics” – which, in the general scheme of his thought, constitutes a third domain of the ways of objectifying the human being as a subject in our culture⁴.

In this article, I present the theoretical-methodological systematization proposed by Foucault to study morality in order to extract contributions and subsidies for the sociological research of moralities. I support the argument that the Foucaultian analysis of morality provides a praxeological perspective that provides at least two relevant contributions and advances to the field of the sociology of morals: first, a counterpoint to the more holistic, culturalist and cognitivist understandings of morality; and, second, the connection between morality, agency and power from a theory of practice on moral subjectivity.

² *L'usage des plaisirs* translated in Brazil as *O uso dos prazeres* (1984a), *Le souci de soi*, translated as *O cuidado de si* (1985) and finally, *Le aveux de la chair*, translated as *As confissões da carne* (2020), fourth volume, published posthumously.

³ This concept does not refer to social representations of a preexisting object. By problematization, Foucault means “the set of discursive and non-discursive practices that make something enter the game of true and false and constitute it as an object for thought (whether in the form of moral reflection, scientific knowledge, analysis politics etc.) (FOUCAULT, 2006c, p. 242).

⁴ The other two domains refer to the constitution as subjects of knowledge through relationships with the truth and to the constitution of subjects, acting on each other, through power relations. (FOUCAULT, 2014a, p. 223).



Sociology of morality

Sociology's interest in the phenomenon of morality is not new. The sociologies of Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and Talcott Parsons fully attest to this primary interest, to the point that sociology is confused with a science of moral life (ABEND, 2010). In all of them, the problem of values, norms and morality is found as a necessary and privileged condition for studying human social life and the history of its transformations. However, despite the interest and the marked presence of morality and values as a sociological topic in the classics, there is not exactly a sociology of morality in them.

Contrary to what has happened in other areas, such as anthropology, psychology, social philosophy and even neuroscience and biology, interest in the topic of morals in sociology has gone through a temporal hiatus. In fact, one can speak of the loss of the privileged status that morality once enjoyed as a key problem of the discipline. His identification with Parsonian functionalism, which during the second half of the 20th century was under intense and intense criticism in sociology, especially in the USA, is one of the explanatory factors for the ostracism of the subject in the discipline (HITLIN; VAISEY, 2010, p. 53).

As a disciplinary specialty, the sociology of morality only emerged recently, developing between the late 1980s and early 2000s (ABEND, 2008). It is, in this sense, a field "rediscovered" by sociology (McCAFFREE, 2016).

Under the influence of some works from other areas, in particular social and political philosophy, sociologists and sociologists have once again turned their attention to the moral dimensions of social phenomena and to the place of values in people's everyday experience. The most recent sociological approaches to morality try to define a change of scale and treatment in relation to the classical perspective on morality (ABEND, 2010). In order to renew its approach and explanation (HITLIN, 2015), the role of values and moral norms in internalization, integration and social consensus loses its centrality, as does the dependence of morality on the underlying logics of strategic action and domination. In their place, gain priority the heterogeneous sociocultural contexts and processes that constitute the presuppositions, meanings and moral systems that shape and guide individuals, groups and organizations in their perceptions, relationships, interactions and behavior patterns in terms of values, evaluations, obligations and commitments in the most diverse domains of social interaction (HITLIN; VAISEY, 2010).

In this sense, contrary to a macro-sociological and structural perspective, a micro-sociological, contextualist and stratified treatment of morality is privileged. This is studied both

as an independent variable and as a dependent variable of social phenomena. In other words, it seeks to elucidate their various levels of relationship and determination with varied factors of a historical, economic, cultural, political and institutional nature (HITLIN; VAISEY, 2010).

Among the variety of topics for reflection and research in the field of moralities⁵, the question of the moral dimensions of power relations is, according to the most important manual for dissemination and balance in the area, one of the most outstanding and relevant themes (HITLIN; VAYSEY, 2010, p. 08). In this area, two perspectives are quite influential and used to apprehend the dynamics and nexus between morality and power, they are: the “pragmatic sociology of criticism and action regimes”, whose exponents are Boltanski and Thevenot (1991), and the Bourdieusian-inspired cultural sociology by Canadian sociologist Michèle Lamont (2000; 1992) with her research on the problem of moral boundaries between social classes and other collectivities⁶.

In the first approach, morality and power are understood as discursive processes interrelated to “justification struggles” in which ordinary human practices and relationships are irremediably involved in the most diverse daily and public situations of controversy and divergence. For Boltanski and Thevenot (1991), common people, in different contexts of interaction and based on a plurality of value principles, invoke, evaluate and oppose different moral reasons and visions of the common good to justify, question or confirm the legitimacy of certain collective arrangements and their provisional consensus.

In other words, power and morality coexist in an agonistic way in the contingent normative agreements that sustain the social world, especially in the critical moments and tests through which the latter, in its different domains, is put in check as to its principles of validity and justification. Both, therefore, it can be said, are inherent parts of intersubjective relationships and of people's ability to act and intervene in the construction and transformation of the social world (BOLTANSKI; THEVENOT, 1991).

In the second approach, in turn, morality and power are intertwined as cultural processes through which groups self-understand their identities and differences in relation to other groups, establishing and justifying material and symbolic distinctions and inequalities among

⁵ For a more detailed bibliographic review of the sociology of morality, see: BRITO, Simone Magalhães; FREIRE, Alyson Thiago Fernandes; FREITAS, Carlos Eduardo. Sociologia da moral: temas e problemas. In: FAZZI, Rita de Cássia; LIMA, Jair Araújo. **Campos das Ciências Sociais**: figuras do mosaico das pesquisas no Brasil e em Portugal. Petrópolis, RJ: Vozes, 2020, p. 481-497.

⁶ Studies of moral panic, moral crusades and scandals and, on the other hand, although stronger and more recurrent in anthropology, studies of government technologies are other important examples of perspectives that are concerned with articulating morality and power. For more details see the text *Sociologia da moral: temas e problemas* (BRITO; FREIRE; FREITAS, 2020).



themselves. For Michèle Lamont (2000; 1992), social relations are traversed by evaluation patterns whose meanings and representations, available in the form of shared and stratified cultural repertoires, people draw and establish “moral boundaries” between them. Moral values and beliefs are, in fact, crucial contents to make sense of identities, hierarchies and the boundaries of class, race, gender and nationality. Moral logics underlie and legitimize the production of different logics of power and domination, such as those of superiority and inferiority and discrimination and stigmatization, as well as acting in the ways and responses constructed and mobilized in the confrontation and contestation of the latter (LAMONT, 2000; 1992).

Taken together, these two approaches present, to different degrees, some deficits and overdeterminations, which, in my view, the Foucauldian analysis of morality can help to calibrate. Although competent to identify and describe the languages, rules and regularities of moral discourse, as well as their situationality, relationality and effects, they overdetermine certain dimensions, such as the role of reflexivity and the symbolic, without linking them to another fundamental point of moral action, namely: the production of the moral subject.

As I will try to demonstrate, Foucault develops a praxiological approach to morality. In it, the constitutive practices of subjectivity, in a given sociocultural and historical context, figure at the center of the analysis of moral experience. It is through them that the philosopher seeks to examine and understand how individuals produce themselves as moral subjects and, at the same time, subject themselves to certain types of power and institutions.

His genealogy of the technologies of moral subjectivation has not yet received due attention in terms of its theoretical potential for sociological research on morality, especially in the production of Brazilian social sciences - in which the perspectives of interactionist and pragmatic inspiration predominate, with a strong inclination towards sociology of the “economics of justification regimes” by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thevenot (FREIRE, 2013; WERNECK, 2016; WERNECK; OLIVEIRA, 2014)⁷. This article therefore seeks to collaborate to increase the interest of sociologists and sociologists in the contributions of Foucault's “genealogy of ethics” to the sociological research of moralities – something that anthropology

⁷ On the other hand, efforts to build alternative perspectives in the study of values and morals have been carried out in the country. It is worth mentioning some of them: Edmilson Lopes Junior (2010) based on the contributions of Mark Granovetter's economic sociology; Simone Brito (2019; 2011), who has relied on Theodor Adorno and Zygmunt Bauman, as well as employing the figurative sociology of Norbert Elias; and, finally, Carlos Eduardo Freitas (2018), who in his doctoral thesis built his analytical framework from the theory of agency and moral identity of Charles Taylor and the sociology of the genesis of values by Hans Joas.

has already pointed out and put into practice for some time (FAUBION, 2011; LAIDLAW, 2002).

Foucault rediscovers the moral question

Foucault's attention to the moral question is due, above all, to the implications and theoretical-empirical requirements that the reassessment of his initial project of a history of sexuality posed for the French philosopher. Before that, the passages in which Foucault dedicated himself to directly dealing with issues related to the theme of morality are rare and quite marked by his critique of modern humanism. Regarding the modifications of the project of a history of sexuality, the author is categorical about the new level that the moral dimension has acquired in his work: “I tried to rebalance my entire project around a simple question: why is the sexual behavior a moral issue, and an important moral issue?” (FOUCAULT, 2014a, p. 216, our translation).

Investigating the changes in the constitution of the subject in relation to sexuality led him to a field of experience in which the archeology of knowledge and the analysis of power devices seemed insufficient to clarify. Until then, the main concern of Foucault's work was to examine how, in the modern West, the subject was formed and disciplined by the production of discourses of truth and by strategies of knowledge-power. From the end of the 1970s onwards, the intellectual challenge that began to impose itself on him became of a different order: no longer to relate subject and truth, and sexuality in particular, to the emergence and functioning of power devices, but to the ways in which individuals worry and try to govern and shape their existences, desires and behaviors as a “relationship of the being with itself” – *rapport à soi* (FOUCAULT, 1984a, p. 10).

This reformulation effort and the philosopher's concern with the moral question can be seen in his courses at the *Collège de France* in the 1980s, in the lectures and interviews⁸ of that period and, finally, in the historical and documentary material that Foucault began to research with more determination and interest: “The field that I will analyze is constituted by texts that intend to establish rules, give opinions, advice, to behave as one should” (FOUCAULT, 1984a,

⁸ The courses *Subjectivité et vérité*, de 1980-81, *L'hermeneutic du sujet*, de 1981-82, *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres*, de 1982-83 and *La courage de la vérité*, de 1983-84. Among the interviews, it can be mentioned: *Sobre a genealogia da ética: resumo de um trabalho em curso*, performed and published in English in 1983 (FOUCAULT, M. On the Genealogy of Ethics, An Overview of Work in Progress. In: DREYFUS, H., RABINOW, P. **Michel Foucault**. Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics. 2. ed. Chicago, The University Chicago Press, 1983, p. 229-252) and the *A ética do cuidado de si como prática da liberdade*, realized and published in 1984 (FOUCAULT, M. À propos de la généalogie de l'éthique, un aperçu du travail en cours. In: DREYFUS, H.; RABINOW, P. **Michel Foucault**: un parcours philosophique. Paris, Gallimard, 1984b. p. 322-346).

p. 15, our translation). Especially in the analysis of how Greco-Latin culture problematizes sexual behavior, Foucault examines a type of moral literature: philosophical texts, treatises on existence, manuals of conduct, reflections on the art of living, a series of writings written by philosophers, doctors and moralists of Hellenic and Roman cultures.

It is not by chance that, discussing the time lapse between the volumes of the history of sexuality, the French philosopher responds that it is now a matter of studying the “birth of a morality, of a morality since it is a reflection on the sexuality, about desire, pleasure” (FOUCAULT, 2004, p. 241, our translation).

Studying morality: from rules to the constitution of the subject

In the programmatic introduction to the *Use of Pleasures*, Foucault (1984a) states that his work on the practices of sexual austerity in the ancient world brought him an unexpected and thought-provoking surprise, namely: a peculiar and distinct sense of morality when compared to the modern and its emphasis on the universality of a code.

In modern theories of morality, Foucault maintains, there is an important neglected issue. He is referring to a crucial component of the moral life, which, in his view, is analytically distinct from rules, values, principles and moral codes. These are the practices through which individuals seek to transform themselves, their attitudes and habits, into a culturally valued and personally significant way of being morally (FOUCAULT, 1984a).

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As can be seen, in the field of moral philosophy traditions, Foucault is closer to the concerns of virtue ethics (MACINTYRE, 2001) than to utilitarianism (MILL, 2005) and deontology (KANT, 2013). That is, the question of what it means to be virtuous and act according to a valued conception of the good rather than the abstract question of discovering and substantiating criteria to define what is a correct action. In this way, he tries to include in the field of reflection and research on morality a unique theoretical and empirical problem: “the forms and modalities of the relationship with himself through which the individual constitutes and recognizes himself as a subject” (FOUCAULT, 1984a, p. 10, our translation). It thus proposes a shift in emphasis in the investigation of moral life: instead of simply the normative

and evaluative systems and codes that inform a given field of conduct, reasoning and relationships over time and space, moral and production practices of ways of being moral in specific historical-cultural contexts.

For Foucault (1984a, p. 26-7), one can distinguish three levels of phenomena characteristic of morality as a field of investigation. They are: “moral code”, “morality of customs” and “ethics”. These three levels, although distinct, are defined in terms of their relationship with the dimension of conducts.

The first level concerns the rules, prescriptions and regulations applied by different institutions (family, school, religious temples). It is the set of values and norms proposed to individuals and groups for the determination and organization of the field of their conduct, as well as the institutions and power relations that sustain their functioning, historical development, their changes, disappearance (FOUCAULT, 1984a, p. 25).

The second level is that of “morality of manners”. This refers, in turn, to the actual behavior of individuals towards the moral codes and prescriptions imposed on them. That is, how they behave in relation to rules and moral values: submission, respect and obedience, resistance, neglect, transgression, cynicism. The study of this aspect of morality must focus on the ways in which “individuals or groups conduct themselves in reference to a prescriptive system that is explicitly or implicitly given in their culture [...]” (FOUCAULT, 1984a, p. 25, our translation).

Finally, Foucault considers that the study of morals also includes a third level, “ethics”. Even though it is a very important dimension throughout the history of morality, it has still been little studied. When Foucault speaks of “ethics”, he does not mean by this the behavior of adherence to principles and norms that dictate how to act and what conduct to adopt, but, much more, the mode of relationship cultivated with oneself with the purpose of acting and being in a certain way. By ethics, he means, in fact, the reflective and morally engaged work to constitute oneself as a certain type of moral subject.

Ethics is, therefore, a form of subjectivation, which can best be qualified in its specificity as moral subjectivation, that is, the ways and practices in which individuals and groups act upon themselves, and in a manner consistent with standards, aspirations and shared and organized moral conceptions, to constitute themselves as determined moral subjects. Ethics, in this sense, deals with the historical forms and modalities of creating ways of life and the elaboration of conduct, because “one thing is a rule of conduct; another, the conduct that can be measured against this rule. But another thing is still the way in which it is necessary to 'conduct' oneself” (FOUCAULT, 1984a, p. 26, our translation).



In this sense, the starting question for studying morality does not address the contents of the codes and norms that govern and guide moral action. It starts from the following question: what are the moral practices and everyday techniques that individuals and groups employ on themselves to become a certain type of person and subject? It is, therefore, a matter of shedding light on how a particular production of the moral subject is put into practice and what are its qualities, senses, activities:

[...] the individual circumscribes the part of himself that constitutes the object of this moral practice, defines his position in relation to the precept he respects, establishes for himself a certain way of being that will count as his moral fulfillment; and, for that, he acts on himself, seeks to know himself, controls himself, puts himself to the test, perfects himself, transforms himself (FOUCAULT, 1984a, p. 28, our translation).

Therefore, the moral subject does not exist without a work of moral subjectivation, without individuals putting into action a set of daily activities through which, with effort and repetition, they are observed, interpreted, evaluated, corrected, controlled and try to shape themselves. For this reason, studying the moral life of groups and societies requires researching the forms of activities used to produce a particular moral subject, which, Foucault writes, “are no less different from one morality to another than the systems of values, of rules and interdictions” (FOUCAULT, 1984a, p. 29, our translation).

Foucault seeks to broaden the scope of what is meant by “morals”, placing it beyond the problem of obligation and rule, that is, of subjective internalization and conformity of action to a comprehensive external code of values and norms. Researching the field of moralities means trying to understand the processes of constitution of the moral subject, driven by certain practices, technologies, aspirations and relationships that take subjectivity as a living and plastic matter on which it is possible and desirable to exercise and cultivate a productive moral action, shaping and transforming certain dispositions, ways of being and ways of living.

Moral work: technologies and practices

Foucault analyzes ancient ethics from a set of prescriptive texts and manuals of a philosophical, medical and religious nature. In them, the philosopher observed the centrality of a type of practical work that individuals must dedicate themselves if they want to become moral subjects of their conduct, especially in their relationship with pleasures. In these texts, which form the historical material of his latest courses and books, a varied series of practices and exercises stand out, such as self-examination of conscience, retreats, resistance exercises in the

face of pleasures, correspondence for oneself and for others, meditation, physical ordeals of abstinence, notes and interpretations of dreams, reflective walks, public penances, confessions of faults, among others (FOUCAULT, 1984a).

These practices and exercises are activities that are adopted by individuals so that they can act on themselves. They are part of a process of reflected, elaborate and systematized training and procedures whose reason for being is to build and modify the very way of being of individuals and, in this way, put into action what Foucault (2016, p. 267, our translation) names as “techniques of the self” or “technologies of the self” means: “procedures, which undoubtedly exist in every civilization, which are proposed or prescribed to individuals to establish their identity, maintain it or transform it according to certain ends, and this thanks to relations of mastery over oneself or knowledge of oneself for oneself”.

It can be said that, for Foucault, human beings are not just “animals that interpret themselves”, as the Canadian philosopher Taylor (1985, p. 45) writes. Human beings are animals that, engaged in interpreting and modifying their behavior, produce themselves. They become subjects when they try, through certain activities and procedures, to achieve morally valued ways of being and acting. In short, they are animals capable of constituting their subjectivity⁹.

As far as this article is concerned, the argument is that the concept of techniques of the self (FOUCAULT, 2014b) is one of the main conceptual tools to analyze morality from the point of view of practice and the historical forms of constitution of the moral subject. With the concept of techniques of the self, the constitution of the moral subject can be analyzed as a work of self-constitution of the self. On the role of these techniques in the moral field, Foucault (2006c, p. 244, our translation) is categorical: “I do not believe that there is morality without a certain number of practices of the self”.

The work of moral subjectivation requires intense moral, reflective and practical engagement of the individual with himself. One must, Foucault observes, structure his relationship with himself as a practice. This approach to morality, more attentive to practices and particular forms of relationship with oneself, raises, I think, relevant analytical gains.

First, it places morality, value systems and behavioral norms, in the field of practices and subjectivity, displacing it from holistic and culturalist understandings that reify it as a

⁹ The notion of “techniques of the self” and their empirical operationalization by Foucault anticipates what Peter Sloterdijk (2013) will later call “anthropotechnics”, although without the explicit motivation of grounding an ontologically oriented philosophical anthropology. On a more general level, it is no exaggeration to say that Foucault offers, based on the notion of techniques of the self, a history of the technologies of self-subjectification.



symbolic sphere of autonomous or hyper-determined values and representations. The Foucaultian effort, in this sense, is to establish the phenomenon of morality in terms of the relationship between the self and values and norms, understanding it as a relationship that, although intersubjectively oriented by beliefs, principles and conventions of obligation, is above all a praxiological and bodily engaged relationship – far, therefore, from the disembodied reflexivity of a certain pragmatic sociology. Morality is a historical-sociological field defined and guided not only by obedience to principles, values, rules and norms, but also by the reflected adherence to ideals, commitments, virtues and shared ethical aspirations in the form of practices, and practices that build postures, behaviors and self-understandings, forming a broader technology or form of moral subjectivation.

In the same sense, moral experience is not driven only by what Charles Taylor (1997, p. 16-17) calls “full life senses” and “strong evaluations”. Again, it is necessary to pay attention to the routinized use and employment of certain techniques, exercises and morally constitutive activities by individuals in a given context and according to certain aspirations and conceptions of the moral subject. Foucault's emphasis on the idea of asceticism, on the role of routinized exercises and the techniques used to constitute types of moral subject and relationships with truth, as a framework for historical reading leaves no doubt as to the primacy of practices as a category and an unity of moral analysis. It can be safely said that Foucault adopts a theory-of-practice¹⁰ approach to the study of morals (RECKWITZ, 2002).

Finally, by raising the subject's *autopoiesis* practices as a relevant issue to understand the history and singularity of morality, Foucault manages to elaborate a solution to the subjection/freedom dichotomy¹¹, very present in the field of study of morality. If his approach to morality is actually interested in the processes of self-constitution of culturally valued and personally significant ways of being for individuals and groups, it is essential to foreground the moral agency of individuals over themselves, without forgetting, of course, interdependencies with institutions, groups, power devices, knowledge, codes.

¹⁰ The theory of practice presents itself as an alternative theoretical perspective to the textualist, culturalist and intersubjectivist understandings of action. It emphasizes social practices as a starting point for the intelligibility of social phenomena. For more details, see RECKWITZ, A. Toward a theory of social practices: a development in culturalist theorizing. **European Journal of Social Theory**, v. 5, n. 2, p. 243-263, 2002.

¹¹ Foucault's later writings seem to add, more properly than his writings on the genealogy of power, to the efforts of several other authors who, from the last quarter of the 20th century, tried to overcome varied conceptual oppositions, such as action/structure, micro/macro and objectivity/subjectivity (ALEXANDER, 1987; ORTNER, 2006).

Morality and subjectivity

Moral subjectivation is not possible without problematizing one's experience of oneself, without attributing meaning to one's conduct, without mobilizing knowledge and resorting to resources and activities to exercise and build self-relationships and self-understandings. The concept of techniques of the self provides the conceptual mediation to open up subjectivity as a domain of moral experience that can be studied by grounded knowledge. The practical self-relationship that human beings establish with themselves, that is, subjectivity, exist rooted in a positive field of historicity, since they are irremediably involved in social practices, institutions, knowledge, power relations, cultural values, prescriptive codes.

In order to detail, with greater rigor, and to support a theoretically more refined understanding of how the process of constitution of the self as a moral subject occurs in particular historical ethics, Foucault (1984a) lists four combined operations that constitute the moral relationship with oneself ("ethics"). The determination of 1) "ethical substance", or, the part of himself that the individual must take and constitute as the main matter of his moral conduct, examples are the Greek aphrodisia, the flesh in Christianity, modern sexuality, the emotions and the contemporary identities; 2) "the mode of subjection", the forms of recognition and justification of moral obligations with the rule and its practice, which can be appeals, for example, to the "cosmological order", the "divine will", the "natural law", the "reason"; 3) "ethical work" (asceticism), that is, the forms of elaboration and self-training by which individuals act on themselves in order to transform themselves into a moral subject, examples are the Greek "care of the self" and the Christian "hermeneutics of oneself"; and, finally, 4) "the teleology of the moral subject", the meanings and purposes sought in the constitution of a way of being characteristic of the moral subject, examples: the subject of self-control among the Greeks, the purified subject among the Christians, the rational and autonomous subject among the moderns, the authentic and unique subject in the contemporary world.

This conceptual insight helps to organize the analysis of the various operations and dimensions involved in the process of moral subjectivation. It is not about capturing a general rationality, because as these operations in their concrete forms are historically variable, moral subjectivation can be constituted in different ways, according to different logics, combinations, techniques and precepts. To produce themselves as moral subjects, individuals evaluatively order and compose a multiplicity of morally significant material and symbolic elements in a given historical and sociocultural context. If, on the one hand, there is involvement and reflexivity in the moral production of the self, on the other hand, in an incorporated and tacit



way, moral subjectivation is a process that depends on certain shared cultural formulas, principles and tools, even if these are socially selective and unequal, according to certain relationships and relevant markers in the context in question.

The unfolding of morality to also include subjectivity, the self-relationship producer of the subject, at the same time reflexive and practical and defined in an agonistic of power practices and practices of freedom, does not mean falling into subjectivism or adopting a phenomenological approach of oneself. The practices of the self that form subjectivity do not have as a premise, important to say, a relationship of transparency between the agent and himself. Just as morality has a history in the form of different practices, technologies, value systems, and can therefore be studied and understood, subjectivity, as Foucault thinks, also comprises a historical field with objects, social practices, techniques, institutions, knowledge, relationships and determined norms. It is not a starting point, but an arrival point.

The novelty is that Foucault (2004; 2014a) emphasizes that individuals are not mere products of the action of others, they can also constitute themselves (act on themselves) as subjects, that is, participate actively, and equally through analyzable historical practices and relationships, of the production of what they are or aspire to be (subjectivation)

In theoretical terms for the analysis of morality, this understanding of subjectivity shifts the focus of moral action. Thanks to a certain reading of Durkheim and Parsons, it is very common to delimit moral action to the process of conformation between rule and conduct, that is, on how individuals adapt to moral expectations and injunctions according to a given collective normativity. Although, like Durkheim, Foucault (1984a) agrees that society constitutes the origin and foundation of morality, and not a divine will or universal reason, such a conclusion does not seem to him sufficiently enlightening and pertinent for the study of morality, so that this is not the path he intends to walk. In fact, he is interested in the relational level between subjectivity and morality, and it is on this that our author actually bases his approach to morality. With this, the French philosopher circumvents two very common pitfalls in the understanding of the moral question: 1) sociologism, the reduction of morality to the idea of habits and customs socially approved in a given collectivity and 2) scholasticism, the primacy of theoretical-philosophical conceptions to the detriment of everyday moral models in historical experience.

In his “ethical turn”, Foucault (1984a; 2004) not only reinforces his non-substantialist conception of the subject and his refusal of the modern philosophical dualism between a “transcendental subject” and his empirical life. He actually goes on to demonstrate how, even at an apparently more intimate and self-absorbed level, such as the reflexive relationship of the



subject with himself, it is a relational and open form, mediated and constituted by analyzable historical practices, with institutions, norms, behavior schemes, knowledge, techniques.

Morality and power

As part of the genealogy of the subject, the formation of the moral subject, explains Foucault (1984a), maintains – at historically varying levels and forms, it cannot be stressed enough – a relationship with the structures of power and domination, that is, with the forms to govern others. Ethics, in the sense defined here by Foucault (1984a), is not outside or in opposition to politics - understood as the exercise of technologies of power and government capable of structuring different fields of conduct.

Paying attention to Foucault's analysis of ethical life and moral experience among the Greeks and in Christianity, it is quite clear that his approach takes into account how the techniques of power and conduct of others intersect and operate intertwined with ways of relating oneself and the self-constitution of the moral subject. Despite the relative autonomy of moral experience in relation to the techniques of power, there are interdependencies and correlations between them. The meanings of ethical practices and the historical singularity of modes of moral subjectivation inevitably pass through apprehending the relationships between the latter and the logics of power with which they intersect.

The classical morality of the use of pleasures, in the Greco-Roman world, is entangled in political conditions and in logics of domination and inequality. As is well known, this is a morality explicitly aimed at an aristocracy of free, well-positioned and privileged men regarding concerns with the material reproduction of their lives. Therefore, men who enjoy very favorable conditions to stylize, with determination and enthusiasm, their behavior and to cultivate a relationship “between the exercise of their freedom, the forms of their power and their access to the truth” (FOUCAULT, 1984a, p. 219). As Foucault (1984a, p. 219, our translation) emphasizes, it is a virile morality, assured “in a very harsh system of inequalities and coercion – in particular regarding women and slaves”.

Self-mastery, the telos of classical sexual ethics, is a way of proving, justifying, and exercising social, moral, and aesthetic superiority over others. The ethics of classical antiquity are based on a normative principle according to which power over oneself (“self-control”) is an indispensable moral and political condition for governing others. Without being able to govern oneself and form a virtuous and admirable character, one cannot aspire to govern others, with justice and rationality, either in the polis or in domestic contexts (FOUCAULT, 1984a; 1985).



It is in the analysis of the moral subjectivation of Christianity, however, that one can best and most thoroughly examine how, in Foucault, morality and power interact and function. Christianity is a religion characterized by a moral experience of strong subjection and obedience. Its faithful must fulfill certain obligations of faith, follow certain dogmas, recognize ecclesiastical authorities, accept certain books and discourses as sources of truth and revelation. Unlike morality in the plural and the personal quest to create ethics and lifestyles in the Greco-Roman world, Christianity is intended as a single morality, codified in a universal system of rules and obligations that, in order to guarantee such a claim, it created a powerful and broad institutional apparatus of power (FOUCAULT, 2004, p. 290).

However, instead of the structure and power dynamics of the church, Foucault (1984a, p. 31) reviews the monastic spiritual practices of the first centuries of the Christian era, such as the rituals of confession, retreats, fasts, the direction of conscience. In them, the French philosopher apprehends a peculiar mode of moral subjectivation, namely: the production of a subject endowed with a kind of “interiority” and “deep truth” whose movements, contents and meanders must be probed, known and confessed by the subject himself.

The relations with oneself put into practice by Christianity, of recognizing the temptations that are formed within the soul, are obligations of truth of the subject with himself. Only in this way, through a relationship of deciphering and self-confession, can one achieve the moral way of being valued in this context, a “state of holiness, purification and self-denial”. Such practices and obligations build, therefore, a subjectivity “alert about one’s own weaknesses, temptations, and flesh” (FOUCAULT, 2006d, p. 71, our translation).

The constitution of this type of subjectivity, which engages in self-decipherment under obedience and subjection to others, as well as to a religious system of universal rules, is the basis on which Christianity shapes, in the same gesture, the production of a certain moral subject and the exercise of a great technology of power, called by Foucault as “pastoral power”. For Foucault (2014b, p. 287), the Christian techniques and practices helped to give life to a political technology, which is, at the same time, totalizing (“governing and leading the flock”) and individualizing (“the soul of every believer, of every sinner”). Christian pastoral power is based on a kind of pedagogy according to which individuals need to be led by others. It is a technology for the direction of consciences and conduction of conduct, aimed at producing knowledge and extracting a “truth” about the “interiority” of individuals through a network of subjection and obedience relationships and confession techniques.

For Foucault (2011), the contribution of Christianity to the history of moral subjectivity consists precisely in the invention and institutionalization of a confessional subjectivity; the



constitution of a moral subject who maintains a relationship of obligation to produce a discourse of truth about oneself (his thoughts, feelings, intentions, desires) - and to be linked to him - under the dependence and obedience of another. Even today, to a large extent, this model of subjectivity is at the basis of the notion of subject in modern medical, psychiatric and judicial discourses and practices.

Final considerations

In this work, I sought to discuss the late Foucault's theoretical-methodological approach to morality, as well as to present his conceptual vocabulary. The aim was not to carry out an exercise in exegesis. The effort of this work consisted of contributing to the opening of new perspectives and useful analytical tools for theoretical and empirical research. In the sociological field, this has been a task carried out by several researchers examining and evaluating the theoretical contributions of different authors and theoretical lineages, such as, for example, Ignatow (2009), in the USA with the concept of *habitus* by Pierre Bourdieu (2009) and here in Brazil, the already mentioned Edmilson Lopes Junior (2010), Carlos Eduardo Freitas (2018) and Simone Brito (2011; 2019) researching in the field of moralities.

I have identified four defining coordinates of the Foucaultian analytical framework that can guide a praxeological approach to morality. The first consists of studying morality from the point of view of the constitution of the subject. For this, it is convenient not to take the moral subject as a prior datum of reason or to assume an inherent normative competence of human agency. First and foremost, approach the subject as a result of a process of moral subjectivation, according to specific practices and relationships whose forms of production of the moral being are varied, shared and historically unique.

Second, to introduce into morality the problem of subjectivity and the moral agency of individuals. That is, the forms of relationship employed by the subject to act and think about oneself in order to become the moral subject of one's actions. The classic sociological question of the internalization of values and norms is shifted from the mere conformation to external rules to the terrain of the relations between moral action and the self, understood as the realization of a relational work of construction, routinization, creativity and reflexivity of the agent on oneself and one's own action.

Third, and as a logical consequence of the previous points, approach morality from the primacy of practices, as they are the formative and self-forming activities of moral subjects. Rather than appealing to wholes such as culture, society, emphasizing ways of acting and



thinking, and how they organize the everyday moral lives of groups in given contexts and, in this way, engender particular historical ethics.

And finally, the fourth coordinate concerns the intersections between morality and power. Identify the links and affinities between the exercise of power, its strategies and technologies, with the forms of constitution of the moral subject, its practices and particular ways of being. In other words, to expand and integrate in the analysis of the logics of power and domination the practices of the self that work as producers and sustainers of subjection relationships and subject forms of moral subjectivity.

Taken together, these four coordinates inspire, in my view, a new treatment of morality. They help to demarcate it in a specific analytical and empirical field and without equating and reducing it to culture and the social, understood in a holistic and totalizing way. In this sense, to study morality is to investigate the modes of moral subjectivation and the techniques of the self put into practice to constitute, in a certain way, a certain field of experience of the conduct and relationships of human beings with themselves.

The concerns and basic guidelines of the Foucaultian approach to examine morality as moral subjectivation can be listed in the form of the following questions: what part of themselves and their behavior do individuals take as an object of reflection, concern and moral action? What meanings and motivations guide the moral practice they exercise on themselves? What types of moral subject do they seek to build and realize? What ways and means do they have and use to intervene and act on themselves? What effects are produced on bodies? What ends do individuals aspire to achieve with their moral practice? How and from what points do self-relationships and power relations intersect, reinforce and integrate themselves into broader structures of domination and coercion?

Now, the above questions are, in fact, questions of deep sociological interest. It can be said that they guide the guidelines of a program of sociology of morals, which I would like to call a “sociology of forms of moral subjectivation”. In this program, morality is understood, praxiologically, as a bundle of practices for the formation of the moral subject, practices that constitute moral forms of life, moral forms of being and being in the world.

A sociology of forms of moral subjectivation would therefore investigate the forms of constitution of the moral subject in the diversity of relationships, activities and spaces of everyday life, that is, how values, conceptions of person and ideals of conduct are incorporated through routinized practices and self-subjective, producing certain ways of being moral. In the task of investigating and understanding the social world and human relationships, this seems to me to be a research investment worth experimenting with.



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