

## A Foucauldian Concept of Ethics

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### Abstract

This paper explores the evolution of 'ethics' in course of time and how it influences the life of humankind. The paper also deals how the great French Philosopher and psychiatrist Michael Foucault considers ethics as being developed on the basis of the continuity of events that occurred in history and how the discontinuities that had happened in the past were conveniently forgotten. Ethics hence changes its face now and then and it depends on the history and culture. Foucault states that each man has got his own ethics, "*Man prescribes rules* for his judgement, which is logic, for his discourse, which is grammar, *for his desires, which is ethics*. He then believes himself to have reached the summit of theory". If the discontinuities were registered through 'situation based *discourses*' with 'case based reasoning', then, ethics might have been changed then and there and there would not have been necessity for cosmic concern.

Discourse is not like a confession or well prepared lecture that is spoken with introduction and warning. The knowledge gained from that kind of speech or actions is to be registered and written that may link the discontinuities in history. Unless the like events that are occurring at different places and times are recorded brought into history they will be termed as uncommon (a discontinuity) and would be forgotten.

According to Foucault, "morality" is the real behaviour of individuals in relation to the rules and values. Following or resisting a set of codes is one's morality. Ethics is freedom to have one's morality. If many individuals have same type of morality there the ethics of the people is uniform and it becomes a continuity. On the other hand the deviation in morality becomes discontinuity.

Key Words: Ethics, Discourse, Continuities, Discontinuities, Historians, Morality

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#### Introduction

Michel Foucault is a great French philosopher and historian of thought. In France he is regarded as a kind of national treasure. His books, essays, and interviews have been translated into sixteen languages. Social critics treat his work as a touchstone. In *The Passion of Michel Foucault* James Miller quotes Paul Veyne, the renowned classicist, proclaiming Foucault's work to be "the most important event in the thought of our century." (14) The impact of his work has also been felt across a wide range of disciplinary fields, from sociology to anthropology to English studies and history. His radical attitude to disciplinary boundaries and his refusal to be pigeonholed is very appealing. In an interview in 1983 he states 'in France you have to be, as a philosopher, a Marxist or a phenomenologist or a structuralist, and I adhere to none of these dogmas.'

An individual to Foucault is dynamic and capable of change. Few individuals remain slaves of the living conditions. The individual that Foucault has in mind is a free subject who can either submit entirely to the norms of society or act in one's own way. There is enough space for an individual to act and perform his own ethics.

In a word, ethics can be defined as a 'system of moral principles'. The term is derived from the Greek word *ethos* which can mean custom, habit, character or disposition. Ethics affect how people make decisions, judgements and influence people's lives. The paper explores the evolution of 'ethics' in course of time and the influences of ethics in the lives of humankind. The paper also deals how Michael Foucault considers ethics as being developed on the basis

of the continuity of events that occurred in history and how the discontinuities that had happened in the past were conveniently forgotten.

### Evolution of Ethics

Ethics hence changes its face now and then and it depends on the history and culture. In *The Order of Things* Foucault states that each man has got his own ethics, “Man prescribes rules for his judgement, which is logic, for his discourse, which is grammar, for his desires, which is ethics. He then believes himself to have reached the summit of theory.” (94) If the discontinuities were registered through ‘situation based discourses’ with ‘case based reasoning’, then, ethics might have been changed then and there and there would not have been necessity for cosmic concern.

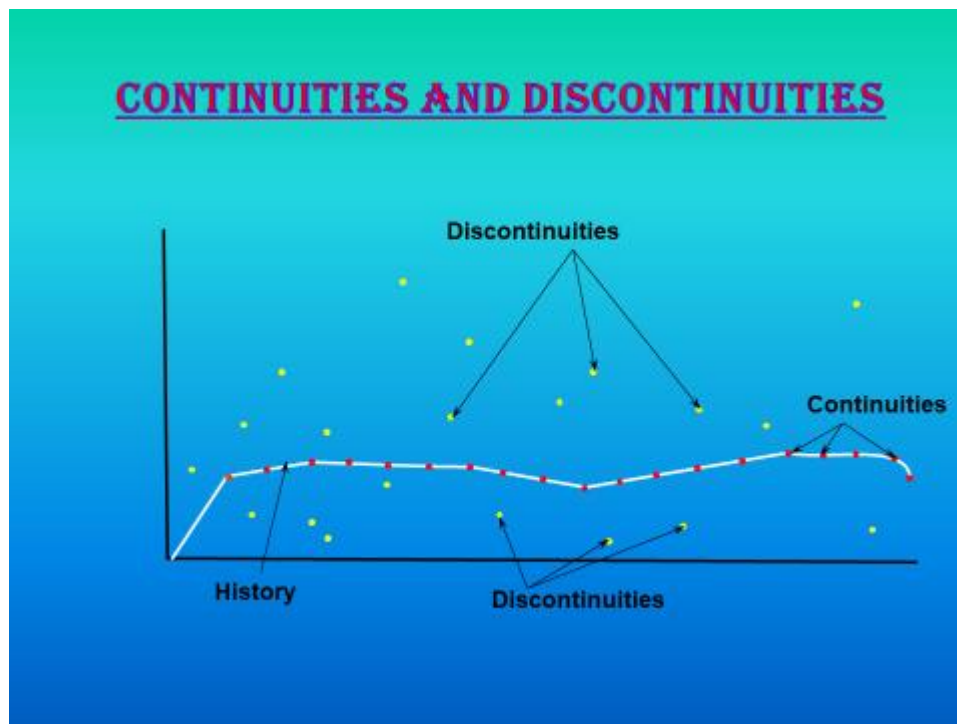
### The Role of Historians

The concept of ethics had earlier been derived from religions, philosophies, traditions and cultures. But the most important discipline that devised the concept of ethics is ‘history’. According to Michel Foucault, ethics has been set by historians within the periphery of history. Formerly, historians set the norms of ethics based on views that are popular, common, consistent, widely held, identical and similar with majority of the people. Ethics has been formulated based on the facts collected from historical events, occurrences, misfortunes and discoveries. But it has to be examined, rationalized, summarized, effaced in order to substantiate the continuity of events. Things that happen frequently and at large are considered as continuous process, (‘continuity’) and termed as ‘normal’, ‘ethical’, and even justified and substantiated with ‘scientific terms’. Thus ethics were formulated by the historians through discourse.

### Normal and Abnormal

This continuity and discontinuity of behaviour was there from the beginning and till date is continuing in the society in every region, every culture and past through ages. The normal behaviour that is the ‘normal morality’ of people was recorded in the history but the ‘abnormal morality’ of people was not recorded. And they were deliberately omitted by the historians. The historians have ignored the distinct accounts which was considered as disgrace and temporal dislocation. If these discontinuous events are recorded every now and

then in history, the 'so called' abnormal or 'the other' would not feel 'out of place' or 'odd one out'. The knowledge that an event that is happening today had also happened some decades back at some other place affirms one, that things are regular, normal, and not odd, abnormal or sudden.



Proving the presence of discontinuities in the past is Herculean task for the historians in general. A specific comportment of a particular culture and period that is not similar with the majority is unacceptable and considered as 'ethnical'. But there is a possibility of such an eccentric affair happening elsewhere in the world. The fact is that the historians have failed to mention them in history. As the occurrence of such events are not chronicled there is no proof that such an event had happened in the past. However, if these discontinuities are deliberated seriously by the society who are setting norms and grammar for 'ethics', then the logic behind the occurrences could be understood and ethics may be revised according to the real happenings. Here, discourses on the events play a vital role, provided they are heard, listened and considered seriously.

However, literature is not grammar and tends to be out of the bound of normally set rules such that, later on, "attention has been turned, on the contrary, away from vast unities like 'periods' or 'centuries' to the phenomena of rupture, of discontinuity." Foucault opines

that the history of thought, of knowledge, of philosophy, of literature continually appear to be striving, seeking, and finding, more and more discontinuities. Michel Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* states:

Beneath the great continuities of thought, beneath the solid, homogeneous manifestations of a single mind or of a collective mentality, beneath the stubborn development of a science striving to exist and to reach completion at the very outset, beneath the persistence of a particular genre, form, discipline, or theoretical activity, one is now trying to detect incidences of eruptions. (4)

The status and nature of these disruptions differ considerably depending on the culture, province, religion and period of time.

#### Foucault and Discontinuity

A discontinuity himself Foucault had a fear of being branded as ‘abnormal’. Foucault is of the view that he has ethics as he defies the rules of normalization and considers himself a ‘discontinuity’. However he makes many researches and wants to be categorized as continuity on the one hand and on the other hand, desperately wants to defend the morality of the ‘other’. According to Foucault, morality was a matter of individual choice; anyone could come and share in it. He further adds that ethics is the practice of freedom to have morality, that is in ethics, one has the freedom to obey the rules or defy the rules.

According to Foucault, “morality” is the real behaviour of individuals in relation to the rules and values. Following or resisting a set of codes is one’s morality. Ethics is freedom to have one’s morality. If many individuals have same type of morality there the ethics of the people is uniform and it becomes a continuity. On the other hand the deviation in morality becomes discontinuity. In *The Use of Pleasure* Foucault states that morality consists of both moral code and the concrete activities of moral agents. Moral code denotes more or less explicitly framed “set of values and rules of action recommended to individuals through the intermediary of various prescriptive organizations such as family, educational institutions, churches, and so forth.”(25) in which they partake. The latter indicates the actions of people who existed in history in so far as those actions comply with, obey or resist, respect or disrespect the values and norms recommended to them by the prescriptive organizations. Foucault claims that in addition to moral code and actual behavior of the individuals morality

also consists a third expanse, namely ethics. He concisely defines it as a relation of the subject to itself, but a more technical definition of ethics is the conduct required of an individual so as to render its own actions consistent with a moral code and standards of moral approval.

For Foucault, conduct is an area that is broader than moral agency and includes both non-moral actions and the exercising of non-agential abilities, for instance, attitudes and demeanor. Ethical conduct, then, consists of the actions performed and pains endured intentionally by a subject for the purpose of engaging in morally approved conduct. In *The Use of Pleasure* Foucault states:

A moral action tends toward its own accomplishment; but it also aims beyond the latter, to the establishing of a moral conduct that commits an individual, not only to other actions always in conformity with values and rules, but to a certain mode of being, a mode of being characteristic of the ethical subject.  
(27)

Reading Foucault's life and works may lead to describe him as a man of law unto himself, but it is not so as he himself does not want to remain as a discontinuity. Foucault in his *Order of Things* mentions how man creates his own ethics,

Man, by his nature, always tends towards the nearest and most pressing result. He thinks first of his needs, then of his pleasures..... and when he turns back upon himself and begins to reflect, he prescribes rules for his judgement, which is logic, for his discourse, which is grammar, for his desires, which is ethics. He then believes himself to have reached the summit of theory . . . ;  
(94)

After ethics is formulated, the individual undergoes 'subjectification' by the (ethical) moral standards set by the society and the subject-function has been fixed on him, to which he is psychologized and normalized. It is from of all these processes that the current individual evolved, about which one can speak, hold discourses, and attempt to find science. The science of man, as it is observed and considered now is actually the science of the individual after the effect of this series of procedures set against him. And it seems that it would be absolutely false historically, and so politically, to appeal to the original rights of the individual against something like the subject, the norm, or psychology.

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