

Dancing with Foucault: On the Sources of Telic Power in Nonideal Social Ontology

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Abstract: This paper argues that Åsa Burman’s concept of telic power in nonideal social ontology can be deepened by integrating Michel Foucault’s account of power in both his mid-period work on governmentality and his later work on ethics. Telic power is the ability of individuals to act in relation to shared ideals. It emerges from two distinct but interrelated sources: (1) the internalization of ethical ideals through subject-formation and (2) governmentality as a structuring of conduct through rational norms and practices. To capture how ideals circulate across both registers, I introduce the notion of ethical discourse—the socially embedded circulation of exemplary ideals and role models. Ethical discourse functions both as a medium of normalization and as a resource for self-formation. Drawing on feminist critiques of gendered ideals, such as postwar femininity, and a critique of neoliberalism, I argue that Foucault’s dual account of subjectivation and governmentality clarifies and expands Burman’s schema of telic and structural power, offering a richer framework for nonideal social ontology.

Keywords: Nonideal social ontology, Deontic power, Telic power, Åsta, Johan Brännmark, Åsa Burman, Michel Foucault

10.25365/jso-2026-9378

Published online July 17, 2026

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1. INTRODUCTION

Recent work in social ontology tries to move beyond idealized descriptions of social structures and institutions. Rather than assuming perfectly just or rational agents operating within coherent institutional frameworks, this approach emphasizes the complexities of social reality, including power imbalances, unstable norms, contested identities, and conflicts between legal institutions and lived experiences. Charles Mills (2005) highlighted this distinction in his critique of ideal theory, pushing philosophers to focus on the actual, often oppressive social configurations in which individuals live. Building on this tradition, Åsa Burman (2023) has advocated for a “nonideal social ontology” that recognizes the role of power in forming social realities and relationships.

This paper responds to Burman’s call by focusing on telic power, one of several sorts of power she has identified. Unlike deontic power, which concerns the ability to claim, forbid, or sanction, telic power shapes what individuals value, pursue, or become. Telic power operates not by imposing obligations but by defining the ends that people regard as desirable or valuable. It shapes the range of possibilities from which agents choose and act. As such, telic power is constitutive rather than regulative: it contributes to the types of people and lifestyles that are intelligible within a specific social context.

Yet Burman’s framework leaves important questions unanswered about how telic power actually functions. She frames telic power as arising from social evaluations against shared ideals (Burman 2023: 188–198) but does not explain two dimensions. First, how do agents themselves internalize ideals and arrive at an internal “ought”? When Jane feels she should keep her home spotless as a “good housewife,” this involves not just external evaluation but internal self-formation. Second, how do these individual-level processes scale to produce population-level structural effects? Burman’s framework treats telic power as primarily individual and structural power as systemic, but the mechanisms connecting personal self-formation to collective outcomes remain unclear.

This paper argues that Michel Foucault offers resources to address both dimensions. Foucault provides what I call a dual account of telic power’s sources: ethical subjectivation (how individuals form themselves in relation to ideals through self-reflection and discipline) and governmentality (how populations are managed through techniques that shape what is considered normal, healthy, or productive). To capture how ideals circulate across both individual and population levels, I introduce the concept of ethical discourse—the socially embedded circulation of exemplary ideals and role models. Ethical discourse functions both as a medium through which governmentality works and as material for individual self-formation. Drawing on

feminist critiques of postwar femininity and Foucault's analysis of neoliberalism, I show how this dual account clarifies Burman's schema of telic and structural power and resolves tensions in her framework.

This paper aims to "dance with Foucault"—that is, to bring Michel Foucault's analysis of power into step with Burman's nonideal social ontology. Foucault is a natural dance partner in this context: his work, especially from the early 1980s onward, offers a nuanced account of how power works not just through law and obligation but through ethics, governmentality, and the shaping of subjectivity. Foucauldian theory can thus illuminate the telic dimension of social power that Burman emphasizes. Conversely, framing Foucault's insights within Burman's ontological framework structures them analytically and shows their relevance to contemporary debates in social metaphysics. By emphasizing telic power as a distinct form of social influence, this synthesis expands the toolkit of nonideal social ontology. It provides a framework for examining how aspirations, ideals, and ethical orientations contribute to the construction of social reality.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 2 introduces Burman's typology of power and identifies three conceptual gaps that a Foucauldian analysis can address. Section 3 examines Foucault's later work on ethics, showing how telic power arises through self-formation within ethical discourse. Section 4 shifts to Foucault's theory of governmentality, showing how population-level normalization generates both telic and structural power and how these two forms blur together. Section 5 concludes by discussing implications for nonideal social ontology.

2. TELIC POWER IN NONIDEAL SOCIAL ONTOLOGY

2.1. The Nonideal Turn

The study of social reality has long been dominated by what Åsa Burman (2023) calls the "Standard Model" of social ontology—an approach exemplified by John Searle, Margaret Gilbert, and Raimo Tuomela. This model analyzes social institutions primarily through collective intentionality: shared beliefs, mutual recognition, and cooperative acceptance. On this view, social facts like money, marriage, or property exist because participants collectively intend them to exist and coordinate their behavior accordingly. Burman argues that this model has several limitations. First, it cannot account for the fact that many institutions, such as slavery and racism, do not advance the common good, but systematically benefit some at the expense of others. Second, the model struggles with non-reflexive social phenomena like inflation or economic crises, which disappear when analyzed through the lens of collective agreement. Third, and most importantly for our purposes, the Standard Model under-develops the

concept of power, limiting it primarily to institution-based deontic rights, obligations, and sanctions.

Charles Mills (2005) articulated the fundamental problem with such ideal theory: by focusing on how perfectly just institutions would function under ideal compliance, it systematically obscures the non-ideal realities that structure people's lives—injustice, oppression, racial and gender hierarchies. An adequate social theory must begin not with idealized assumptions about rational cooperation but with careful attention to how power actually works to produce and maintain social reality. This critique exposes a crucial limitation in the Standard Model: it under-theorizes power, treating it primarily as institutionally defined authority—the deontic powers and duties attached to social roles. The judge's power to sentence, the property owner's right to exclude, the citizen's liberty to vote—these are important forms of social power, but they represent only a narrow slice. What about the power to define what counts as normal, valuable, or desirable? Consider gender relations that operate not just through formal legal restrictions (deontic power) but through ideals of femininity and masculinity that shape what women and men aspire to become. These forms of power—constitutive rather than regulative, productive rather than merely restrictive—fall outside the Standard Model's purview.¹

In response, several theorists have developed “nonideal social ontology”: an approach that foregrounds power, oppression, and contestation. Ásta's (2019; 2025) theory of “categorical injustice” demonstrates how the conferral of social properties to individuals can impede their ability to perform specific actions. Johan Brännmark (2019a, 2019b, 2021) shows how deontic statuses can be distributed through prototype-based processes, thereby explaining phenomena such as racism that the Standard Model cannot adequately capture.

What unites these approaches is a shared commitment to analyze social reality as it actually is, structured by power relations that are often asymmetrical, contested, and oppressive. Within this framework, Burman's (2023) taxonomy represents a significant advance, enabling us to analyze power with greater precision. Telic power is particularly significant, capturing normative influence that works through ideals and aspirations rather than rules and obligations. Yet Burman's account leaves important questions unanswered about how such power functions—questions that a Foucauldian analysis can address.

¹ I use “constitutive” differently than Searle's (2010) notion of constitutive rules, which create institutional facts (as chess rules constitute the game). By contrast, I use “constitutive” to describe how telic power shapes subjects themselves—what kinds of persons and lives become intelligible within a social context. This concerns constitution of subjectivity rather than constitution of institutional facts.

2.2. Burman's Power Taxonomy

Within the framework of nonideal social ontology, power can be defined as the capacity of an individual or group to effect outcomes either directly or indirectly through relationships with other agents. This relational aspect is important: unlike the Standard Model's emphasis on mutual recognition and shared intentionality, social power works through relationships that need not be reciprocal, acknowledged, or voluntary. Power may remain unexercised, yet it exists as a potential that can be tapped when needed. An agent's innate capacity to act is brute power, while their relationships with other agents determine their social power. Burman differentiates three main types of social power: deontic, telic, and structural.

Deontic power refers to claims, duties, permissions, prohibitions, or immunities associated with transactions or institutional roles. For example, a judge has the authority to sentence; a citizen has the right to vote; sales transactions generate reciprocal claims and duties for buyers and sellers. Deontic power is based on correlative incidents between parties: when A has a claim, B has a corresponding duty; when A has a liberty, B has no claim against A's action. This correlativity structure is important because, as we shall see, it helps to differentiate deontic from telic power. Following Burman (2023: 210–213) and Brännmark (2019a), deontic power is best understood through these correlative Hohfeldian incidents that show the basic deontic relationships between two parties. Deontic power is considered institutional when it is based on recognized status functions or prototypes that are supported by a sufficient number of agents. It can arise formally through explicit rules or informally through recurring behavioral patterns, and it can be distributed unequally, leading to domination or categorical inequalities.

In contrast, telic power describes an agent's ability to act relative to an ideal. As Burman (2023: 188–198) defines it, an agent possesses telic power when there is an ideal against which she can be evaluated. The perceived distance by other agents from this ideal influences the agent's capacity to achieve specific outcomes. Consider Burman's example of the "good housewife." When such an ideal circulates within a social context, women are evaluated against it. Conformity to this standard may confer power or admiration, while deviation can result in isolation or stigma. Telic power thus functions through evaluative comparison rather than institutional recognition.

When others assess a woman in her role as a housewife, they do not hold a deontic claim requiring her to keep her house spotless—there is no corresponding duty owed to anyone in particular. Nonetheless, she experiences an "ought," or a desire-independent reason for action, that informs her decisions. While she may face social pressure, the resulting normativity differs from a deontic duty. The distinction between deontic and telic power comes down to an "ought" grounded in actions

(claims, duties, and rules) versus one grounded in a person's aspirations and demeanor (virtues and ideals).

According to Burman (2023: 198), several features distinguish telic from deontic power. Telic power is gradual rather than binary—one can approximate an ideal to greater or lesser degrees, whereas deontic statuses typically hold or do not. Telic power depends on the existence of ideals rather than institutions, and it can refer to supererogatory achievements that go beyond any duty. Additionally, each category corresponds to specific reactive attitudes: deontic power may elicit resentment, blame, and guilt, while telic power tends to elicit indignation, denouncement, and shame.

Finally, structural power (Burman 2023: 199–204; 220–225) refers to the impact of social and material systems on agents' ability to effect outcomes. It differs from deontic and telic power in that it works indirectly, without relying on agents' intentionality or their recognition of a social "ought." Burman cites the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted working conditions and disproportionately affected people unable to work remotely. Individual decisions about commuting aggregated to produce unintended macro-patterns of class-based vulnerability. This illustrates a well-understood social phenomenon: deliberate micro-decisions of agents can lead to unintended and unanticipated macro-level outcomes, such as when mild preferences for similar neighbors produce patterns of racial segregation (Schelling 2006: 147–154). Structural power emerges from such effects—outcomes that individuals neither intended nor coordinated.

Although Burman's taxonomy is a significant step forward in the analysis of power, three major issues concerning telic power remain to be addressed, which we will now examine.

2.3. Three Gaps

Three gaps limit our understanding of how ideals shape social reality. First, Burman does not explain how agents themselves internalize telic ideals and arrive at a social "ought." Second, she presumes that telic ideals exist without analyzing how they are produced, acquire normative force, and circulate through society. Third, the relationship between telic and structural power remains unclear—we lack an account of how ideals working at the individual level produce population-level structural effects.

Problem 1: The Self-Formation Gap

Burman defines telic power primarily as the outcome of how others assess an agent's alignment with an ideal. When neighbors evaluate Jane as a "good housewife," their judgments affect her social standing and capacity to achieve outcomes. However, this

external focus overlooks the internal dimension: how do agents themselves internalize ideals and experience them as normative? Jane does not merely know that others expect her to keep a spotless home—she evaluates herself against this standard, monitors her own performance, and experiences shame when she falls short. This self-surveillance and self-discipline cannot be reduced to external evaluation. The transition from “others expect this of me” to “I ought to be this kind of person” requires explanation. Without an account of this internalization, we cannot fully understand how telic power works.

Problem 2: The Production Gap

Burman treats ideals as socially available standards—the “good housewife,” “real men,” the “competent researcher”—but does not explain how particular exemplars emerge, gain normative force, and become culturally dominant, while others fade. Ideals are not natural or timeless but historically contingent, arising from specific social, economic, and political conditions. The “good housewife” ideal did not exist in the same form before World War II, nor did it persist unchanged into the 1970s. Yet existing accounts offer no genealogical analysis of how such ideals are produced, maintained, and contested over time. Understanding telic power requires attending to these processes of production and circulation.

Brännmark’s (2021) deontic distribution model shows the same gaps. Yet he offers an important insight: human categorization often works through similarity to prototypes or exemplars rather than through rule application.² Rather than checking whether specific conditions are met, we assess based on distance from prototypical cases, considering multiple features simultaneously. Someone may be recognized as deserving deference based on gender, age, class, vocal timbre, posture, and dress—an overall assessment rather than rule-following. This prototype-based process can systematically distribute deontic statuses: who is owed deference, who has standing to speak, and who counts as competent. Brännmark shows this can generate informal institutions without explicit rules or collective agreements.

However, Brännmark’s framework succeeds only when at least one dimension stays sufficiently clear—either the counterparts (who hold what incidents toward whom) or the content (what actions or objects the incidents concern). When both dimensions become vague simultaneously, the deontic framework breaks down. Consider Brännmark’s (2021: 236) example of Jack and Jill:

2 Brännmark (2021: 242 fn 11) acknowledges that he examines the same social phenomena using similar concepts as Åsta in *Categorical Injustice* (2019), who introduces the notion of categories and conferred social statuses.

- Jack expresses interest in Jill at a bar by smiling, buying her a drink, offering a compliment, and then speaking to her. Jill feels uncomfortable but also perceives a vague obligation to respond politely. When she raises concerns about his behavior, Jack replies that he has simply acted kindly. Jill's friend comments, "I don't know, Jill, he hasn't really done that much, has he?"
- The situation resists deontic analysis. Who exactly has claims against whom? Does Jill have a claim that Jack leaves her alone, but on what basis, since he has not clearly violated any rule? Jack has the liberty to approach women in bars—but then why does Jill's discomfort seem justified? Also, what precisely constitutes the problematic action—buying a drink, persistence, the overall pattern? When both counterparts and content remain indeterminate, correlativity cannot be reliably applied. The situation offers what Brännmark (2021: 248) calls an 'interpretative refuge,' in which Jack uses "nice gestures" to justify actions that cause Jill discomfort.
- This raises the question: what other mechanism is at play? Suppose Jack identifies with what might be called "Bond masculinity": an assertive male who expects women to succumb to his advances without ever taking the initiative themselves. The notion of sexual harassment then becomes difficult to grasp. Conversely, Jill "senses intuitively" (through body language, context, experience) that Jack's behavior is predatory. Her dismissive reaction is not deontic: she is not asserting "You violate my right to X." Rather, she rejects the normative framework that would make Jack's behavior seem appropriate.

This example highlights several problems at once. First, it shows the self-formation gap: How did Jack internalize Bond masculinity as a valid way of being? How did Jill develop feminist consciousness that allows her to recognize predatory patterns? Second, it shows the production gap: Why is Bond masculinity culturally available as an ethical framework, and how did it gain and keep normative force despite feminist challenges? Finally, the dispute between Jack and Jill cannot be resolved through clarifying deontic relations; it stems from their use of fundamentally different evaluative frameworks and ideals. This is the domain of telic power, and it requires tools different from those provided by Brännmark's deontic framework.

Problem 3: The Population-Level Gap and the Telic-Structural Blur

As Ásta (2025) alludes, there is an apparent instability in Burman's distinction between telic and structural power. Burman (2023: 194–195; 220–221) uses the same example—gender bias in research funding decisions—to illustrate both telic power (when evaluators apply prototypes of the "ideal researcher," expecting women to be more productive than the average male candidate to receive the same score) and

structural power (when these patterns aggregate to produce systemic gender inequality in academia). Are these the same phenomenon viewed at different scales, or genuinely distinct forms of power? If the former, what distinguishes telic from structural power? If the latter, how do they relate?

These questions point to a deeper issue: existing accounts treat telic power as primarily individual (agents orienting themselves to ideals) and structural power as systemic (aggregate patterns emerging from individual actions). However, when people internalize ideals and change their behavior, they collectively alter institutions and social structures, thereby restricting options for future cohorts. The process by which individual telic power scales up to drive these structural changes—and the mechanisms connecting personal self-formation to societal outcomes—remains unclear.

Toward Foucault

These three problems have a common structure: they concern how ideals function at both individual and collective levels, shaping both personal self-understanding and large-scale social patterns. Addressing them requires theoretical resources that can illuminate both the internal processes through which agents form themselves in relation to ideals and the external mechanisms through which ideals circulate, gain authority, and produce structural effects. Michel Foucault's work provides such resources via two interconnected concepts: ethical subjectivation (explored in Section 3) and governmentality (explored in Section 4). Together, these offer a dual account of telic power's sources and mechanisms, clarifying how ideals shape social reality across multiple scales.

3. ETHICAL SELF-FORMATION

3.1. Ethics and Self-Relation

Section 2.3 identified the self-formation gap: Burman's account focuses on how others evaluate agents against ideals but does not explain how agents themselves internalize those ideals and arrive at an internal "ought." When Jane feels she should maintain a spotless home as a "good housewife," this is not because she owes this to her husband in the way correlative duties require. Instead, there is a transition from "others expect this of me" to "I ought to be this kind of person." This latter "ought" operates in a different register from deontic obligation—it concerns not what rules govern actions, but what kind of person one should be.

Foucault (1990: 262–265) distinguishes between morality and ethics in a way that clarifies this transition. Morality refers to codes of conduct—values and rules of action prescribed by various agencies (religious institutions, law, custom).

Ethics, by contrast, concerns the relationship one has with oneself: how individuals constitute themselves as moral subjects through practices and reflections. Ethics is not about following moral codes but about self-formation—the work individuals do on themselves to become certain kinds of subjects. Consider someone who, as befits a good judge, refrains from excessive behavior in public. This restraint is not because others hold a deontic claim requiring it, but because such conduct is constitutive of being a good judge. This is ethics in Foucault's sense: not what rules govern my actions, but what kind of person I should be.

Foucault's concept of subjectivation (*assujettissement*) directly addresses this phenomenon. According to Foucault (1997: 291), ethics originates in the self's relationship to models proposed, suggested, or imposed by its culture, society, or social group. From this perspective, telic power arises from self-reflection and inherently entails a degree of optionality. Foucault (1997: 167) associates this optionality with an individual's capacity for resistance:

What I mean with power relations is the fact that we are in a strategic situation toward each other. ... So we are not trapped. It means that we always have possibilities of changing the situation ... If there was not resistance, there would be no power relations. Because it would simply be a matter of obedience ... So resistance comes first, and resistance remains superior to the forces of the process; power relations are obliged to change with the resistance.

Foucault (1997: 270–271; 276) also describes how subjectivation is produced through 'technologies of the self'—practices by which individuals actively shape their conduct in relation to available ideals. Drawing on ancient Greco-Roman practices of self-care, Foucault examines how self-formation is a voluntary pursuit—not dictated by laws or religious duties, but a conscious choice about how to use one's freedom. Ancient examples include daily self-study, dietary regimes, control of desires, and cultivation of friendships. Modern examples include grooming rituals, fitness tracking, career planning, and self-help practices. These transform external exemplars into lived self-relation. Not just "I know the ideal" but "I work on myself to approximate it."

Because self-formation requires self-reflection, it inherently allows for resistance and conflict. Individuals may reject certain ideals while embracing others, meet conflicting standards, or consciously diverge from prevailing models. For instance, someone might resent being compared to the archetype of a housewife yet still aspire to exemplify the attributes of a conscientious judge. Still, as both a woman and a person of color, she feels compelled to exceed expectations, which she perceives as unfair. This element of choice differentiates telic power from mere compliance. Self-formation and the capacity for resistance should be understood not solely as

external opposition, but as the development of alternative methods for shaping one's life within prevailing ideals. Therefore, Foucault (1997: 290) argues, subjects should not be understood as substances with fixed essences, but rather as forms capable of adopting different relationships with themselves and others. This form can change over time and may manifest as a mode of resistance.

This account of subjectivation addresses the self-formation gap. It shows how telic power works not just externally (others evaluating Jane) but internally (Jane evaluating herself through technologies of the self). The same exemplar—"good housewife"—functions both as an external standard and an internal criterion. Foucault reveals that telic power is productive rather than merely restrictive: it shapes subjectivity by providing the terms through which agents understand themselves. And because this shaping occurs through self-relation involving reflection and choice, it inherently involves the possibility of resistance.

3.2. Ethical Discourse

The account of subjectivation addresses how agents internalize ideals through self-formation. But this raises a further question: how do ideals gain normative force and circulate socially in the first place? This is the production gap: explaining how particular exemplars become normatively salient while others recede.

To address this, I introduce the concept of ethical discourse—the socially embedded circulation of exemplary ideals and role models. Ethical discourse encompasses cultural frameworks and models related to masculinity and femininity, as well as professional and civic virtues, standards of authenticity and self-expression, and the various narratives that depict lives as either successful or unsuccessful. These elements together inform our conception of the *summum bonum*, or what it means to have a good life. These ideals are not imposed from above but circulate horizontally through families, schools, advertisements, workplaces, and social media.

Following Brännmark, I consider exemplars as mechanisms of informal transmission that encode recurrent expectations in relational fields. However, I hold that ethical discourse operates in a dual register:

- Externally: It synchronizes prototype-based processes that can create informal institutions through deontic distributions (Brännmark's domain)
- Internally: It provides materials for self-formation through which individuals stylize their existence (Foucault's domain)

The same exemplar—"good housewife," "real man," "successful professional"—functions both ways. When Jane sees images of ideal housewives in sitcoms, this simultaneously signals what others expect of her (external) and provides material for her self-relation

(internal). She experiences this not as two separate phenomena but as one. The external and internal dimensions are analytically distinguishable but phenomenologically unified.³ Ethical discourse achieves its power precisely through this dual operation: it makes ideals feel simultaneously like social facts (true in the world) and personal imperatives (true for me).

How do exemplars gain this normative force—why do they feel compelling rather than merely informative? Williams (1985: 143–145; 155–164; 188–189) argues that ethical concepts fuse fact and value in a single term: “good housewife” is simultaneously descriptive and evaluative. Using such concepts is part of living in a specific social context in which some behavior is appreciated or despised. People gain confidence—not mere tacit agreement or convention—to employ these terms through upbringing, institutional backing, and public discourse. When someone uses “good housewife” or “real man,” they experience this not as expressing subjective preference but as recognizing genuine value. Williams (2008: 75–104) further contends that agents may perceive a necessity to behave in a particular way, arising from an exemplar as an internalized other whose viewpoint the agent values, representing the agent’s social expectations and her understanding of relationships with others. Crucially, this is not a person who holds deontic claims on the agent. Rather, it is a perspective from which the agent evaluates herself—what kind of person she wants to be, including in her relationships with others. The Stoic sage, the good judge, and the Bond masculine figure function as internalized viewpoints that create a sense of ethical necessity and entitlement.

Foucault’s (1991: 59–60; 81) notion of discourse as a “truth regime” complements this account. It is relevant insofar as it concerns the display of ethical norms and exemplars considered valid in a community at a given moment. Ethical discourse then establishes what counts as a valid way of talking about how to live. Through circulation backed by institutions (family, media, education), exemplars come to feel like natural facts about proper living rather than contingent social constructions. This intertwining of truth and value explains why exemplars have normative force: they don’t merely inform others’ expectations but also provide terms through which people understand what is valuable. This process yields confidence in ethical judgments that seem to recognize objective facts, not merely expressions of subjective preference. This mechanism explains what Brännmark (2021: 236) calls an ‘inarticulate sense of appropriateness’ when using terms like “good housewife”.

3 Of course, these registers do not always match. An example of such dissonance is when someone, to their dismay, is selected for control at the airport because others consider them a “dangerous Muslim.” This captures what Ásta (2019) terms “categorical injustice”—a mismatch between a communally conferred status and someone’s deontic status or self-understanding.

Ethical discourse thus bridges Brännmark's external account and Foucault's internal one. Brännmark shows how exemplars exist in social space and distribute deontic statuses through prototype-matching. Foucault shows how exemplars structure self-relation through truth regimes and technologies of the self. Exemplars gain normative force through circulation, which builds confidence in using these concepts. My contribution is recognizing that this circulation is ethical discourse—a medium operating in a dual register. It explains:

- The production gap: How exemplars emerge and gain authority through historical processes embedded in truth regimes
- The internalization gap: How external prototypes become internal criteria through technologies of the self and gain normative force
- The dual function: How the same exemplar can operate both deontically (coordinating expectations through prototype-matching) and ethically (structuring self-formation)

This dual operation of ethical discourse becomes clearer when we examine a concrete historical case: the production and circulation of postwar femininity as an ethical ideal during the 1950s.

3.3. Case Study: Postwar Femininity

Postwar American society during the 1950s illustrates how ethical discourse produces telic power. Following World War II, US government programs provided veterans with access to higher education and housing, enabling middle-class families to adopt a suburban lifestyle. Many families could live comfortably on a single income, shaping women's roles. As Halberstam (1993: 590) notes, a postwar definition of femininity evolved: women devotedly raised families, supported husbands, kept homes spotless, got dinner ready on time, and remained attractive and optimistic—'prettier than her mother, slimmer, and even smelled better.' This exemplifies the production problem: the "good housewife" ideal was not natural or inevitable. Still, it emerged from concrete historical conditions—the GI Bill policies that enabled suburban homeownership and the consumer goods industries that built markets. Understanding telic power requires genealogical analysis: tracing how particular constellations of traits (domesticity, cleanliness, deference) became exemplary while other ideals were marginalized.

Ethical discourse circulated through popular magazines, advertisements, and sitcoms such as *Happy Days*, portraying suburban housewives as the natural state of women. This was normalization: presenting a contingent ideal as a natural fact. By repeatedly exposing people to the same exemplar, expectations were synchronized across families, schools, media, and workplaces. This demonstrates how ethical discourse

operates externally: coordinating expectations through circulation. Sandra Bartky (1998) shows how media targeted at female audiences establish norms regarding posture, movement, and appearance, generating exemplars that prompt self-imposed discipline. She writes,

[It is] women who practice this discipline on and against their own bodies... The woman who checks her make-up half a dozen times a day... who worries that the wind or rain may spoil her hairdo... who, feeling fat, monitors everything she eats, has become... a self-policing subject, a self committed to a relentless self-surveillance (Bartky 1998: 42).

This illustrates how ethical discourse functions internally: the same images that coordinate external expectations also structure self-relation. Jane does not just know others expect an ideal housewife; she works on herself to achieve this, monitoring her appearance, housekeeping, and demeanor. The external ideal becomes an internal criterion through technologies of the self and self-formation. These are not separate mechanisms but one integrated process. Ethical discourse achieves its power by operating in a dual register simultaneously: Jane judges herself, experiences shame, and intensifies self-surveillance. External pressure and internal aspiration are phenomenologically unified.

Importantly, discipline as such is not necessarily problematic. We all undergo socialization into cultural norms through various forms of discipline, such as toilet training children by age three. Nor is it unique to women—men also face ideal role models and social expectations that structure their self-relation. What made postwar ethical discourse problematic are asymmetrical power relationships. The housewife ideal concentrated women in unpaid domestic labor and low-wage work while reserving higher-status positions for men, naturalizing economic dependency and political subordination. When ethical discourse produces and naturalizes such asymmetries, it becomes a site of critique and resistance.

This asymmetry led Betty Friedan (1963: 1–21) to identify the ‘problem with no name’—women valued primarily as housewives and mothers were hindered from pursuing alternative paths. This protest emerged from within the discourse as women living according to the ideal experienced its limitations through their own self-reflection, illustrating Foucault’s insight that resistance arises within power relationships. The same practices that produced “good housewives” also created subjects capable of questioning the ideal. Judith Butler (1988: 527–528) makes a similar argument about gender performativity. Gender exists only to the extent it is repeated in socially learned actions and behaviors—it cannot be understood as a role expressing an inner self. The processes that enable subjugation can also produce resistance when individuals

intentionally diverge from established norms. Resistance is not about finding an authentic self outside power relationships but emerges through alternative ways of engaging with existing discourse.

Resistance took multiple forms, often working within ethical discourse by proposing alternative exemplars. Later satirical portrayals like *Married... with Children* questioned 1950s ideals by depicting an idle housewife and her boorish husband as grotesque inversions. *Sex and the City* presented women with different relationships to sexuality, career, and partnership—not rejecting femininity but re-stylizing it according to different exemplars (the cosmopolitan professional, the sexually autonomous woman, the ambitious careerist). These were not rejections of ethical discourse but proposals for alternative exemplars within it. Butler's recent work even questions whether gender itself should function as an organizing principle. They wonder: 'Why can't we have a world in which there are women who get pregnant, there are people who don't identify as women who get pregnant, there are women who don't get pregnant?'⁴ Even so, Butler's contribution spreads through academic publications and interviews, trying to influence ethical discourse.

In contrast, activist movements like 1970s feminism seek to alter established power relationships. The #MeToo movement is a recent example of public resistance aiming at reconfiguring telic power. It gained traction following Harvey Weinstein's conviction, exposing how men in positions of authority used power to obtain sexual or affective favors from women without their consent. What made this telic power rather than merely deontic abuse was that such behavior was not only tolerated but often admired in their circles. It signaled masculine dominance, along with a sense of entitlement to predatory behavior as a perk of status. The proximity of Weinstein and others to ideals of powerful masculinity enabled actions that would be denounced in men with less status. #MeToo responded by mobilizing shame—a telic mechanism. By making misconduct public, the movement sought to transform predatory behavior from something admired (a marker of powerful masculinity) to something shameful (a marker of failure as a person). This is resistance attempting to change public beliefs about what behaviors count as approximating or deviating from ideals of masculinity and professional success.

However, resistance incites counter-resistance. As reported in the press, shifts in ethical discourse about gender have produced divergent worldviews among young men and women in North America, Europe, and Southeast Asia.⁵ A considerable proportion of young men believe feminism has gone too far and threatens their

⁴ Henry Mance, "Gender theorist Judith Butler: 'What are they frightened of exactly?'" in *The Financial Times*, March 8, 2024.

⁵ Cf. 'A new global gender divide is emerging,' in *The Financial Times*, January 26, 2024; "Why young men and women are drifting apart" in *The Economist*, March 13, 2024.

prospects. Many young men envision the *summum bonum* in terms of the 1950s American Dream, while young women envision families with equal status, income, and division of chores. This “gender gap” is evident in divergent ethical discourse on social media platforms and in differences in political views. From an analytical standpoint, both movements and counter-movements constitute resistance in Foucault’s sense: efforts to reconfigure power relations from different positions within those relations. Power is relational; shifts for one group prompt responses from others. This dynamic interaction between resistance and counter-resistance suggests that power relations and ethical discourse shape cultural, social, and political tensions that may eventually affect public policy.

In summary, sections 2 and 3 demonstrate that Foucault’s theories of subjectivation and ethical discourse address gaps in Burman’s and Brännmark’s models. While sections 3.1–3.3 explored the issues of self-formation and production, they did not examine the broader question of how telic power exerts structural effects at the population level. Section 4 will discuss how ethical discourse shapes individuals and larger populations, with particular emphasis on Foucault’s notion of governmentality.

4. GOVERNMENTALITY AND THE STRUCTURING OF CONDUCT

Foucault’s concept of governmentality—the “conduct of conduct” or art of managing populations (Foucault 2007: 108–109)—shows how ethical discourse functions not only at the individual level but also at the population level. The ideals that structure self-formation through technologies of the self are embedded within broader techniques for managing populations. Telic power is exercised not only through individual self-formation in relation to exemplars, as discussed in Section 3, but also through the steering of countless individual micro-decisions to produce collective outcomes aligned with governmental rationalities.

This section is organized into three steps. First, it distinguishes between two rationalities of state power: governmentality and juridical sovereignty. Second, it illustrates how neoliberal governmentality exemplifies the management of populations via ethical discourse about ideal economic subjects, highlighting the blurring of the distinction between telic and structural power—not due to conceptual confusion, but as an accurate portrayal of how governmentality works. Third, it compares the individual resistance through self-formation covered in Section 3 with counter-conduct as resistance to governmental rationalities.

4.1. Two Rationalities

Foucault's genealogy of the modern state (Foucault 2000: 298–325; Braeckman 2020) reveals that state authority has two distinct rationalities: sovereignty and governmentality. The first relates to the *raison d'état*—the state's purpose and means as a sovereign entity competing with other states. Sovereignty operates through law: the power of the sovereign takes a deontic form backed by military force, while subjects have correlative rights and obligations. The second rationality concerns a policy that delineates how citizens should behave on state territory, and governmentality, the know-how and practices used to steer a population. Governmentality works through norms and optimization. Both rationalities produce telic power, but through different mechanisms and at different scales.

Foucault (2000: 312–325; 2004: 1–25; Braeckman 2020: 654–656) traces the emergence of sovereign states to the 16th and 17th centuries, when centralized royal authority established deontic power through judicial and taxation systems backed by military force. The concept of *raison d'état* positioned the state as accountable only to itself and other states, leading to competition for territory and influence. Maintaining sovereignty required not just legal and military control but also the mobilization of the population. Following the Napoleonic Wars, general conscription was widely adopted, accompanied by ethical discourse framing the ideal citizen as someone willing to sacrifice for the state. This discourse of civic heroism could be mobilized to legitimize imperialism, nationalism, or patriotism, depending on state objectives.

However, modern states increasingly came to associate success with economic prosperity rather than military strength alone (Foucault 2000: 212–222; 312–325; 2004: 1–25; Braeckman 2020). In the mid-18th century, states established 'the police' as a distinct branch alongside the army, judiciary, and treasury, with the mission of improving citizens' well-being and strengthening the economy. This required systematically gathering data on territory, population, and agriculture—creating what could be called a "science of the state." The French physiocrats were among the first to study drivers of economic activity, and their insights informed Turgot's economic policies. This marks the emergence of modern governmentality: managing populations through expert knowledge rather than law alone.

Unlike military action or taxation, which are legally constrained exercises of sovereignty, governmentality is justified by its utility in achieving state goals. The critical question shifts from "Is this sovereign power legitimate?" to "Is this governance rational and effective?" Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776) exemplifies this logic: the question is not whether state intervention violates rights but whether it optimizes the nation's wealth. Foucault (2004: 51–73) argues that Smith's work shows how particular truth regimes shape governmentality. Economists frame market

activity as a natural process yielding optimal results when left unfettered—Smith’s “invisible hand.” This framework underpins the ethical discourse of liberal governmentality: self-regulating markets, minimal intervention, and utility-based justification of intervention when it occurs, while preserving certain liberties.

This rationality does not eliminate government but reconfigures it. Liberal governmentality must ensure markets function properly—preventing monopolies, enforcing contracts. More importantly, it must shape the population to produce subjects who behave as the economic model requires. Deviant behavior that disrupts market operations must be normalized—not through punishment but through techniques that make certain forms of conduct appear natural, rational, and desirable. Here, ethical discourse about ideal economic subjects becomes the vehicle of governmentality. The productive citizen, the prudent investor, the entrepreneurial self—these are not merely cultural ideals but constructions of governmentality that shape how populations conduct themselves. This sets the stage for understanding how telic power functions at the population scale while blurring the distinction between individual self-formation and structural power.

4.2. The Blurring of Telic and Structural Power

Foucault (2003: 36–40; Braeckman 2020: 662) holds that, unlike sovereignty, which functions through laws, governmentality is based on norms embedded in daily practices rather than on conspicuous exemplars. Unlike the “good housewife” ideal circulating through media (Section 3), these norms appear as technical requirements: credit scores, productivity metrics, and educational rankings. Each appears as a practical necessity rather than a teleological imperative. Yet following these norms forms an “ought” essential for managing daily life. These norms are an inherent part of ethical discourse about the expected conduct of ideal citizens and economic actors. Collectively, these dispersed norms align individual behavior with the aims of governmentality, illustrating how personal rationality can generate collective patterns without explicit coordination.

This highlights the tension in Burman’s framework: structural power operates indirectly without relying on agents’ intentionality, whereas, in governmentality, norms shape agents’ intentionality through detailed requirements embedded in daily practices. Governmentality resembles telic power in that individuals consciously orient to norms—“I should meet performance targets”—and shape themselves by fitting those standards. Yet it also resembles structural power: aggregate effects like wealth concentration and inequality emerge unintentionally, arising from rational choices made in response to practical demands. However, labeling governmentality as purely structural overlooks its purposeful design. The norms aim at achieving specific

population outcomes: cultivating “productive citizens.” While the system’s architecture remains implicit, its effects are not accidental. Governmentality works both through individual intention and beyond it, deliberately shaping societal outcomes that surpass anyone’s awareness or intent. Thus, the distinction between telic and structural power becomes blurred. However, this ambiguity effectively captures the operational nature of governmentality, rather than indicating a conceptual misunderstanding.

Foucault’s (2004: 215–260) analysis of neoliberalism in *The Birth of Biopolitics* illustrates this dynamic. Neoliberal rationality reconfigures citizenship itself: individuals are expected to manage their lives as enterprises competing with other market players, optimizing education, health, and work experience as forms of ‘human capital.’ The overall rationale is that this conduct promotes innovation and enhances government efficiency, thereby stimulating economic growth that benefits the population and strengthens the state. The subject is redefined as an “entrepreneur of the self.” Freedom of action becomes the vehicle of governmentality: individuals are free to choose, but are expected to do so in ways that optimize human capital. Responsibility for success and failure is individualized, shifting risks from collective institutions onto persons.

Neoliberal governmentality functions through measurable norms embedded within daily infrastructure. Education is reconceptualized as a human capital investment, often requiring personal debt, with outcomes assessed through standardized testing and ranking systems. Employment favors flexible arrangements over stable careers, requiring ongoing adaptation monitored through productivity dashboards. Credit scores reflect financial responsibility and influence access to housing and insurance. Wellness initiatives and fitness tracking make bodily optimization measurable. Each norm appears technical, neutral, practical—simply how things work. Yet these metrics transform standards into ideals: to be “creditworthy,” “productive,” or “fit” is to embody the “normal” subject able to thrive. The “entrepreneurial ideal” appears not as a conspicuous exemplar (as in Section 3), but as the accumulated result of complying with seemingly neutral requirements.

This immanence is crucial to governmentality’s effectiveness. Those who struggle experience difficulties as personal failures—insufficient self-investment, inadequate resilience, poor choices—rather than as responses to systematic conditions. The entrepreneurial ideal feels natural because it appears from navigating practical necessities, not from explicit interpellation.

This resolves the population-level gap from Section 2.3. Individual self-formation scales to structural effects through governmentality as the linking mechanism. The same ethical discourse operates at the individual level (providing materials for self-relation through detailed norms) and at the population level (serving governmental rationality). What Burman calls structural power arises here from background ratio-

nalities (liberalism, neoliberalism) that direct collective behavior via ethical discourse. What appears as structure—labor market patterns, educational systems, evaluation metrics—is the crystallized effect when individuals internalize detailed norms coherent with that discourse. The telic-structural blur thus accurately captures a key feature of governmentality: deliberately shaping population outcomes through norms that individuals experience as personal imperatives.

4.3. Counter-conduct as Resistance

Resistance to governmentality differs fundamentally from resistance to ethical ideals discussed in Section 3. There, resistance emerged through individual self-formation—agents could reject specific ideals, such as the “good housewife,” or propose alternatives through technologies of the self. Here, resistance targets the governmental rationality itself, not merely specific ethical ideals. Since governmentality functions through diffuse, ever-present norms embedded in daily life, it cannot be countered simply by personal transformation; instead, it takes a different shape.

Foucault (2007: 165, 191–216; Braeckman 2020: 662–664) emphasizes that, unlike sovereign power, governmentality cannot be entirely restrained by legislation, but it does elicit counter-conduct as a particular form of resistance. Counter-conduct refers to collective refusal to be governed “like that” while experimenting with alternative modes of existence. Foucault explains this through medieval cases of asceticism, mysticism, communities, and appeals to the original Scriptures, which opposed the pastoral guidance of the Catholic Church and eventually led to the Reformation. Contemporary counter-conducts against neoliberal governmentality show a similar dynamic: they manifest as collective movements that question overarching governmental objectives, demand the proper application of science, and promote alternative courses of action. For instance, climate activism as a counter-conduct does not simply advocate specific policies—carbon taxes, renewable energy subsidies. Instead, it questions the fundamental assumptions of the neoliberal ethical discourse. It challenges the relentless focus on economic growth, calls for more attention to climate science, and promotes alternative energy usage and consumer behavior. Counter-conduct primarily targets a particular mode of governance rather than governance itself.

Foucault (2007: 196) distinguishes counter-conduct from political resistance or resistance to economic structures. For instance, the ‘Make America Great Again’ (MAGA) movement also collectively rejects neoliberal rationalities such as globalization, cosmopolitan elites, and technocratic governance. Rather, it seeks to reorient governmentality toward its ethical agenda within the existing political structure and to promote a nationalist discourse. This highlights a key issue: any counter-conduct encounters two rationalities of state authority: the governmentality it challenges and

the *raison d'état*. This is not an insurmountable obstacle, as shown in *The Making of the English Working Class*. There, Thompson (1963: 5–10; 765–766) argues that the working class emerged as a historical phenomenon circa 1830, following a sustained period of resistance by various groups to a specific form of governmentality. This led to distinctive cultural practices and activist movements within the working class. In Foucauldian terms, these can be interpreted as a counter-conduct challenging the dominant ethical discourse of the ruling classes, who saw labor merely as a utilitarian tool. It also led to the British labour movement seeking economic and political reform. Significantly, unlike more radical movements, British labour did not challenge the state itself and had patriotic commitments, as shown during both World Wars. Nonetheless, it profoundly changed social reality.

The immanent character of governmentality—the way norms form the backdrop of everyday life—makes resistance particularly difficult compared to resistance against conspicuous ethical ideals. Unlike the “good housewife” ideal that can be reflected upon and rejected through self-formation (Section 3), norms related to governmentality appear as practical necessities for participating in modern society. Resisting credit scores, productivity metrics, or educational rankings individually is futile; one simply cannot function without them. The entrepreneurial self emerges not from explicit interpellation (“be an entrepreneur!”) but from navigating countless small requirements that together constitute a governmental rationality. Resistance, therefore, requires a different approach that makes the rationality itself visible as contingent and proposes alternative ways of organizing social life.

In a nonideal social ontology, recognizing these two forms of resistance—individual resistance through self-formation (Section 3) and counter-conduct against governmentality (Section 4)—is key to understanding how telic power operates and can be challenged at different scales. A complete account of telic power must capture both the individual's capacity to re-style their existence in relation to ethical ideals and the collective capacity to refuse governmental rationalities that structure the field of possible action. These two sources of telic power—subjectivation and governmentality—generate corresponding forms of resistance that employ distinct mechanisms at different levels of social organization.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that Foucault's dual account—ethical subjectivation and governmentality—addresses three conceptual gaps in Burman's framework for telic power. The self-formation gap is resolved through Foucault's account of subjectivation: agents actively work on themselves through technologies of the self, creating possibilities for both conformity and resistance. The production gap is addressed through

ethical discourse: ideals gain normative force as they circulate through media and institutions, becoming embedded in ethical truth regimes that make specific ways of living appear natural. The population-level gap is resolved through governmentality: the same ethical discourse that structures individual self-formation operates at the population scale, producing structural effects through aggregated micro-decisions oriented toward its goals.

This analysis also reveals that the apparent tension between telic and structural power in Burman's framework accurately describes how governmentality works. Detailed norms function both through individual intentionality (agents consciously orienting to norms) and beyond it (producing aggregate effects no individual intended). This concept illustrates the unique nature of contemporary power, which both individualizes and totalizes, yet allows for counter-conduct as a distinct mode of resistance to governmentality.

This integration expands the analytical toolkit of nonideal social ontology. It provides resources for genealogical analysis—tracing how ideals emerge from specific historical conditions. It highlights power's productive dimension—how it shapes possibilities rather than merely restricts them. And it reveals the connection between individual self-formation and population management, showing how personal aspirations and governmental objectives mutually reinforce one another.

Understanding telic power's dual sources explains both the effectiveness of contemporary governmentality and the possibilities for resistance. Individual resistance through alternative self-stylization (Section 3) and collective counter-conduct challenging governmental rationalities (Section 4) represent complementary modes of contestation. Both work within existing power relations while potentially transforming them—recognizing that resistance is immanent to power itself.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to my advisor, Filip Buekens, for his guidance and constructive feedback. I am also deeply appreciative of Åsa Burman's insightful comments and suggestions on multiple occasions, which have been instrumental to the completion of this work. My thanks are further extended to the two anonymous reviewers, whose remarks contributed significantly to the improvement of this paper.

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