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<b>Authors(s)</b>	Lennon, Mick, Fox-Rogers, Linda
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## **Morality, Power and the Planning Subject**

### **Abstract**

Ethical issues are at the heart of planning. Thus, planning theory has long displayed an interest in debating both the ethical justification for planning and how the activity of planning can be rendered more ethically sensitive. However, comparatively little attention has been shown to how the very constitution of the planner as a 'moral subject' may be ethically problematic for planning practice. This paper addresses this lacuna through an engagement with the philosophy of Michel Foucault. In contrast to how his work is normally applied, this paper accords with Foucault's own direction that his later examination of ethics be used as a lens through which to read his earlier analysis of power and knowledge. Accordingly, the paper first outlines Foucault's innovative reinterpretation of how power and knowledge operate in society before setting this within his novel re-conception of ethics. This theoretical exposition is then employed to interpret material drawn from in-depth qualitative interviews with twenty planning officers working in a range of different contexts. The paper subsequently employs Foucault's ethically informed reading of power and knowledge to identify ethical issues arising from the approaches used by practitioners to justify their planning activities. The paper concludes by suggesting how such issues can be resolved.

**Keywords:** Planning, Ethics, Power, the Subject, Foucault

## **Introduction**

Ethical questions concern how to distinguish good from bad conduct. As such, ethical issues constitute the 'soul of planning' as a practice 'premised on the expectation that through intervention and action better space and placed-based outcomes can be achieved than would otherwise have been the case' (Campbell, 2012a: 393). It is therefore unsurprising that planning theory has long displayed an interest in debating both the ethical justification for planning and how the activity of planning can be rendered more ethically sensitive. However, comparatively little attention has been shown to the ways in which the very constitution of the planner as a 'moral subject' may be ethically problematic for planning practice. This paper seeks to address this lacuna by demonstrating the value of Michel Foucault's frequently neglected later philosophy for elucidating the effects of ethical assumptions on the conduct of planning.

Attempts to identify ways to inform what planning 'ought' to do are part of a deep tradition of validating governmental action on the basis of the 'common good'. However, rigorous effort to methodically scrutinise the particular ethical aspects of planning as a professional practice dates back just a few decades (Campbell and Marshall, 2002a; Hendler, 1995; Pløger 2004; Thomas, 1994; Wachs, 1985). Perhaps most markedly reflecting the fruits of these efforts has been the widespread attention shown to the Habermasian inspired collaborative turn in planning (Forester, 1999; Healey, 2003; Innes and Booher, 2003). This approach endeavours to identify and rectify issues of power asymmetries in planning by seeking to engender rational dialogue and promote the equal right to a hearing among interlocutors. However, this approach has received criticism from those who consider the intrinsically political nature of planning to mean that issues of power can never be properly erased from how people and places are governed (Huxley, 2000; Yiftachel, 1998). Some critics go further by contending that the pleas for 'fair procedure' at the core of collaborative planning may simply institutionalise a platitudinal performance of concern for equality without actually resolving deeply entrenched problems of community marginalisation (Allmendinger and Tewdwr-

Jones, 2002; Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 1998). This evaluation has steered others along a different track where a distinct power-aware approach to planning is promoted. Here, academics such as Roweis (1983) and Yiftachel (1998) have explored the 'dark side of planning' as manifested in a bias against the inclusion of minorities in the planning of urban environments and in the institutionalisation of oppressive planning practices (Yiftachel et al., 2001). Flyvbjerg (1996) in particular has expanded on this concept by employing the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault to analyse how ideals may be warped in application through the power-infused operation of ('real') planning rationality (*Realrationalität*). Here, planning activity is understood as open to corruption as backstage politics delineate the forms of rationality ostensibly employed by planning. Ultimately, this leads Flyvbjerg to conclude that '[d]efining reality by defining rationality is a principal way by which power exerts itself...because rationality and knowledge are power' (1998: 227).

However, Flyvbjerg and Richardson (2002) hold that it is possible to negotiate a path out of planning's dark side by unveiling and questioning the operation of power in planning, rather than ignoring its inherent presence. This distinct power-aware approach to planning has led Flyvbjerg (2004) to suggest that the planner refocus on himself or herself as the object of concern. The emphasis of this 'phronetic' approach is on how power asymmetries exert a restraining effect on people, with an associated recommendation that planners reflect on what they ought to do in light of such knowledge. While this work has done much to illuminate the role of power in planning practices, it primarily conceives planners as operating in situations where they are aware of the power dynamics at play. As such, it paints a picture of planning as a place where practitioners can be held morally culpable for marginalising certain interests in the planning arena. Certomà (2015) has helped address this issue in planning theory by demonstrating the value of expanding Flyvbjerg's approach via the Foucaultian concept of 'governmentality'. Broadly conceived, this concept addresses '[h]ow we think about governing others and ourselves in a wide variety of contexts' (Dean, 2010: 267). It refers to the different rationalities or 'mentalities of government' (Rose and Miller, 1992) that guide

perspectives on thinking and doing. By focusing on how diffuse forms of control inform popular mentalities (Pløger, 2008) and by expanding the concept of government beyond the classically conceived 'State', it advances a more subtle understanding of how a variety of influences emanating from an array of sources shape individual and communal behaviour (Certomà, 2015; Huxley, 2006). Nonetheless, to date such work remains largely focused on the analytics of power, rather than on the ethical questions. This paper seeks to address this lacuna in the application of Foucaultian theory by employing interview material to explore how the planner as moral subject is constituted in ways that may be ethically problematic<sup>1</sup>. However, in contrast to how Foucault's work is normally applied, this paper accords with Foucault's direction that his later work on ethics be used to interpret his earlier analysis on power and knowledge (Flynn, 2010).

Thus, the next section outlines Foucault's innovative reinterpretation of how power and knowledge operate in society before setting this within his novel re-conception of ethics. This theoretical exposition is then employed to analyse the interview material in order to establish how the interactions between power, knowledge and ethics forge particular subject positions that may generate potentially problematic consequences in terms of planning ethics. The following section then revisits Foucault's work to formulate a nuanced interpretation of issues illustrated in the interviews. Specifically, this section of the paper presents a means by which to resolve potential tensions arising between the ostensible ethical intentions of planners and the potentially problematic ethical consequences of their activities.

## **The Moral Subject of Power**

### **Power**

Foucault destabilises presumptions of 'the given' in social relations. To this extent, 'Uncritical acceptance of anything presented as natural, necessary, or ineluctable is problematic from a Foucaultian perspective' (Taylor, 2011: 4). Such uncritical acceptance is understood to permit the emergence of static power relations that facilitate the dominance of a restricted array of reasoning and behaviour that is

considered to be legitimate. As a consequence, alternative modes of thinking and doing are rendered invalid or immoral, thereby warranting social sanction and suppression. Thus, what Foucault shows is that the current 'order of things' (Foucault, 2002) is not inevitable but rather is contingent and so could be otherwise. This project to unmask the 'ontology of the present' (Foucault, 1986: 96), therefore focuses effort on exploring 'the limits of ways of thinking to find possibilities for thinking differently' (Cooper and Blair, 2002: 513).

Foucault attempts to reveal the contours of these limits and expose their effects by drawing attention to how 'the subject' is constituted. By proposing that subjects 'are made' (Foucault, 1982: 777), Foucault challenges the long held view in western philosophy extending from The Enlightenment through to the present, that the subject inherently possesses an indelible 'substance' which endows them with agency by means of an objective rational faculty (Foucault, 1987). Foucault thereby seeks to demonstrate that the subject is shaped by and transmits socio-cultural norms. In this sense, a Foucaultian approach to the subject acknowledges the role of context in forging our understanding of the world. Central to this perspective is attention to the part played by 'power'. A Foucaultian approach holds that conduct is governed by the emergence of relations of power and forms of rationality that mould perceptions in ways that privilege and marginalise different peoples and ideas by producing subjectivities. Thus, to appreciate the effects which flow from the way subjectivities 'are made', one must remain aware of the role played by power in the formation of such subjectivities.

From a Foucaultian perspective, 'power' is not simply that which enables control of others by an individual or group. Indeed, Foucault specifically differentiates his view of power from that of other approaches, be they inspired by liberal, psychoanalytical or Marxist assessments. Instead, power is conceived as a pervasive force inherent to all human relations whether its exertion is intended or not. In this sense, 'Power should be seen as a verb rather than a noun, something that does something, rather than something which is or which can be held onto' (Mills, 2003: 35). This approach suggests that power is 'immanent in' (Foucault, 1990: 94) all social relationships. As

such, a Foucaultian view holds that power 'is 'always already there', that one is never 'outside' it' (Foucault, 1980a: 141). Foucault does not argue that all social relations are reducible to power relations. Rather, he simply suggests that power is an intrinsic quality of every such relationship. Importantly, Foucault contests the 'repressive hypothesis' (Foucault, 1990: 7-8) that conceives power solely as an oppressive force curbing liberty. In its place, he advances a more nuanced understanding of power that sees it as concurrently 'productive, something which brings about forms of behaviour and events rather than simply curtailing freedom and constraining individuals' (Mills, 2003: 36). Key to this interpretation is attention to the ways in which power is integrally related to knowledge.

### **Knowledge**

For Foucault, there is no disinterested knowledge. Accordingly, 'what we take to be true or false, indeed the very distinction itself, is located within a political field' (Smart, 2002: 76). This view overturns the traditional conception of knowledge as that which both can and should comprise universal 'objective truths' existing beyond human relations. Hence, from a Foucaultian perspective knowledge is shaped by and shapes power relations. As power is an omnipresent yet contingent phenomenon of social relationships, the co-production of 'power/knowledge' (Foucault, 1980a) is thereby associated with the context of its production. Consequently, what is viewed as common-sense knowledge in a society is inherently shot through with power. At the heart of this Foucaultian perspective is 'the will to truth' (Foucault, 1981: 56). This is understood as the array of exclusionary practices that produce truths by delineating those concepts deemed false from those that are considered true. Such practices are contained within a 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1980b: 131) that determine the perceived veracity of a knowledge claim and allocates power by establishing the legitimate forms of knowledge required to authoritatively enunciate on an issue. In particular, Foucault stresses the way disciplines such as planning, prescribe what can be counted as legitimate knowledge within a subject area. Through a variety of in-depth historical investigations, he concludes that disciplines produce truths by strict methodological rules and a corpus

of factual propositions that allow for the making of new propositions but within the limits of a 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1980b: 131).

This conception of power/knowledge has drawn criticism regarding what has been interpreted as an emptying of agency from a theory of social relations (Fraser, 1994; Taylor, 1986). Indeed, Alcoff contests that 'Foucault's demotion of subjectivity to an analytic position posterior to power results in a conception of subjectivity deprived of agency' (Alcoff, 1992: 73). However, those who defend the Foucaultian approach contend that such assertions misinterpret 'description' for 'prescription' by confusing Foucault's unconventional explanation of power dynamics with a conventional theory that offers a foundational account of power in contemporary society (Heyes, 2007). Instead, the alternative portrayal advanced by Foucault is an original anti-foundational and all-infusing depiction of power/knowledge that is both constructive and constraining through its broadly implicit modes of operation. It is this innovative conception of power/knowledge that Foucault uses to explain how the 'universal' and 'objective' rationalities of The Enlightenment permeate the 'ontology of the present' (Foucault, 1986: 96) such that it causes us to reflect upon ourselves in certain ways. Thus, in his later works Foucault became acutely concerned with how subjects that 'are made' under such conditions can assert themselves as ethical beings.

## **Ethics**

The concept of ethics for Foucault differs from that which is conventionally conceived in moral philosophy as either the study of abstract ethical models or the scrutiny of normative criteria for applied action. Instead, he defines ethics as 'the kind of relationship you ought to have with yourself' (Foucault, 1984a: 345). For Foucault, ethics comprises 'those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being' (Foucault, 1984b: 10). In this sense, Foucault's conception of ethics comprises a self-forming activity of moral constitution, which as discussed above, must occur in a contingent social context inherently infused with power/knowledge. Foucault elaborated on his conception of

ethics in the introduction to his book 'The Uses of Pleasure' (1984b). In essence, ethics for Foucault forms one element of a triad comprising 'morality'. The other elements of this triad are the 'moral code' and 'moral conduct'. The moral code is the explicit values circulating and broadly adhered to in a social context. Moral conduct refers to the activities of subjects insofar as those activities contravene or conform to the moral code. Ethics then concerns the self-reflective activities of subjects that mediate between the moral code and moral conduct so as to render one coherent with the other. Consistent with this understanding, Foucault also distinguishes between moral obligations and ethical obligations. A *moral obligation* is a requirement of a moral code that either necessitates or prohibits a specific kind of conduct, whereas an *ethical obligation* is a perceived condition for engendering moral conduct. This nuanced differentiation centres on a distinction between obedience and reflection. A moral obligation relates to conformity with a moral code. In this sense, it simply concerns the bivalence of good or bad moral conduct. In contrast, an ethical obligation references the subtle interpretations of those recommendations for how to realise good moral conduct that influence the self-reflective practice of seeking to exemplify such good moral conduct. Foucault's examination of the morality surrounding ancient sexual practices led him to conclude that 'the moral valorization of conduct might be, as it was with the ancients, weighted toward the satisfaction of ethical obligations, or, as it is in modernity, weighted toward the satisfaction of the moral obligations that comprise a moral code' (Robinson, 18.12.15). He derived this conclusion by identifying and exploring four elements of morality that are contingent on historical context. These are namely, 'ethical substance', 'mode of subjectivation', 'self-forming activities' and the 'telos' towards which one aims (Foucault, 1984b). The *ethical substance* is 'the quality of self that is morally problematic, taken as the object of one's ethical reflection, and transformed in one's ethical work' (Robinson, 18.12.15). The *mode of subjectivation* is the manner by which the subject determines the moral code and appreciates its 'moral obligation' to act in accordance with it. *Self-forming activities* comprise those self-reflective activities wherein the subject endeavours to identify the self-transformative ethical practices through which he or she can meet their 'moral obligations'. Finally, the *telos* is the ideal state toward which one aspires in

‘self-forming activities’ wherein the morally problematic ‘ethical substance’ is resolved.

Foucault’s analysis demonstrated the changing particularities, yet consistency in the relationship between these four elements throughout various eras in the ancient Mediterranean world. He admired such coherency in the nature of this self-transformative approach to ethics. Hence he is critical of the legacy bequeathed to contemporary ethical thought by the pivotal change in morality he identifies as having occurred during the Enlightenment. Foucault terms this change the ‘Cartesian moment’ (Foucault, 2005: 14). Prior to this change, morality accented the ‘self-forming activities’ of those ethical concerns focused on ‘the search, practice and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself’ (Foucault, 2005: 15). However, the Enlightenment Project’s emphasis on universal objective rationality sought to supplant such potentially subjective activity with knowledge that could conclusively determine the truth or falsity of a proposition about the self through its apparent logical precision. Thus, Foucault believes that following the Cartesian moment, attending to moral matters becomes merely a rational epistemic pursuit rather than a self-transformative ethical activity. This shift ‘construes moral self-examination as the act of determining whether one’s intentions or acts are consistent with moral obligations’ (Robinson, 18.12.15). In doing so, it reduces one’s moral existence ‘to whether or not one satisfies one’s moral obligations’ (Robinson, 18.12.15). Thus, the logic of moral self-examination subsequent to the Cartesian moment turns on the presumption that the problematic imprecision born of subjective perspectives (the ‘ethical substance’) can be remedied through application of the unique objectifying rational faculty possessed by humans (Descartes, 2008).

However, according to Foucault, ‘The Enlightenment’, which discovered the liberties, also invented the disciplines’ (Foucault, 1979: 222). Consequently, the power/knowledge that specifies the criteria for legitimate assertions in contemporary morality produce moral certainties that close the space for transformative practices. Specifically, practices that may emanate from a critique of

those presumptions underpinning the common-sense knowledge given currency by modern 'regimes of truth' are effectively silenced by this pervasive 'will to truth' of universally applicable rational objectivity. Accordingly, Foucault's project to unveil the 'ontology of the present' (Foucault, 1986: 96) focuses efforts on how to re-engage with the transformative potential of 'self-forming activities' by advancing 'possibilities for thinking differently' (Cooper and Blair, 2002: 513). Foucault, thereby devised four interrelated questions that could be employed to guide the exploration of morality in contemporary ethical debate:

1. *Ethical substance: Which is the aspect or part of myself or my behaviour that is concerned with moral conduct?*
2. *Mode of subjection: What is the way in which people are invited or incited to recognise their moral obligations?*
3. *Self-forming activities: What are the means by which we can change ourselves to become ethical subjects?*
4. *Telos: Which is the kind of being to which we aspire when we behave in a moral way?* (Foucault, 1984a: 352-355)

Thus, in order to explore the applicability and elucidatory potential of Foucault's thinking for planning theory and practice, these questions are now deployed in an analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with planners drawn from a range of planning contexts in Ireland.

## **The Morally Powerful Subject**

Foucault considered that the concepts of 'ethical substance', 'mode of subjection', 'self-forming activities' and 'telos' exist in a mutually interactive and co-constitutive relationship. However, for purposes of coherent presentation it is required that these be presented in an apparently sequential manner. Nevertheless, we stress that this necessary mode of presentation should not be confused with a hierarchy of relationships or chronology of occurrence, and that the co-constituting interactions between these concepts is acknowledged.

### **Ethical Substance**

It is possible to scrutinise the response of interviewees to questions concerning their views on the role of the planner when seeking to identify those perceptions about the 'quality of the self' that is potentially problematic for moral conduct in planning. This is because shared perceptions on the role of the planner reveal suppositions circulating in contemporary 'regimes of truth' regarding valorised characteristics considered necessary to counter attributes of the self that are potentially challenging for proper moral conduct. While respondents were allowed autonomy in expressing how they perceive their roles, the results exhibit a high degree of consistency in terms of the answers provided regardless of the situational aspects of the planners involved in this study. In this regard, it is worth noting that there was little ethnic or cultural variation in terms of the planners interviewed with the vast majority of respondents being white Irish, which is broadly reflective of the nature of the planning profession in Ireland more generally. Amongst the two non-Irish respondents, both originated from the UK but had spent the vast majority of their lengthy careers working within the Irish planning system spanning a number of decades. A relatively even mix of males and females were interviewed and care was given to source planners working within the development management or forward planning (policy development) divisions of the local authorities investigated and at a variety of scales in a bid to reduce stakeholder bias (i.e. assistant executive, executive, and senior executive). Of note is how such responses place considerable emphasis on the procedural aspects of planning, which may suggest that planners are uncomfortable or unwilling to discuss the potentially normative aspects of their roles (Fox-Rogers and Murphy, 2015). Similar observations were made in studies undertaken by Campbell and Marshall (2002b) and Murphy and Fox-Rogers (2015), who identified that planners can be hesitant to talk normatively about the values that underpin their work. However, despite such initial hesitation, the majority of planners interviewed did express clear conceptions of the role of the planner. In their responses, most interviewees conveyed the view that a planner's work involves remaining 'neutral'. As asserted by one senior executive planner working within the area of development management,

*My role is clear-cut enough. It's just assessing planning applications and it's taking the line of...we're trying to promote development and at the same time protect people from any bad effects of development and I think we're relatively neutral.* (Senior Executive Planner, Development Management)

In addition to such explicit assessments, many implicitly presume such neutrality as a feature of the roles they perform. This perceived neutral role was reflected in the responses offered by some of the lower grade planners interviewed, as exemplified by the following self-assessment of their role by an assistant executive planner (lower grade position):

*I suppose at the moment with the work that I do, it's just advising people as to what the planning policy and guidelines that are in place are. We don't have any role in shaping legislation- that's just handed down to us from the DoE [Department of Environment] and we just have to implement it.* (Assistant Executive Planner, Development Management)

Elsewhere, another planner highlighted the centrality, but also the potential challenges, of remaining impartial in their daily activities when relaying their experience of an applicant making an emotional plea for their application to be evaluated favourably. Despite the planner being of the opinion that the extension would set a 'bad precedent for the area', they openly acknowledged that the planner's neutrality was compromised by virtue of the couple's situation,

*I have had an occasion where a woman who was pregnant came in...who basically wanted to extend their house but they wanted to do something that was quite different to the other houses and would have sort of set a bad precedent so we refused them and...I was trying to fight the good fight and look at "okay they're pregnant and they want to extend the house", but ...there had been [similar] applications in the past...and we usually try to fight that...So you know "Oh we're having a kid and all that", but still like that's kind of personal circumstances. So in the end they applied again and got slightly more than they would have I'd say if we had managed to remain completely impartial but it did happen... After the first refusal they came*

*in...and obviously the wife who I'd say was between 6 and 8 months pregnant was sitting there... then she kind of cried a bit and I was thinking "great that's just what I need!". But that kind of thing happens and amazingly is not out of this world you know. (Executive Planner, Development Management, emphasis added)*

The same planner explained that allowing subjectivity to creep into the decision-making process of planners is problematic, not only because of the bad precedent for development that might emerge, but also because the emotional pitches made by an applicant may be more strategic in nature to ensure they receive a favourable decision,

*Unfortunately you sometimes find out afterwards that these things aren't true as well...Like again one planner in South Dublin...had a family on the phone the whole time about getting an extension through for the house saying you know, "an expanding family"... and then one or two weeks later [after receiving notification that the extension was in compliance with the conditions of the planning permission which was granted]...there was an ad in the paper with the house for sale and you could say...that they completely lied about the whole family need because they actually planned to move after.... (Executive Planner, Development Management).*

Consequently, the 'ethical substance' of the planner that is the focus of moral concern is the need to maintain neutrality in the policy implementation and decision-making processes. Whilst such concerns undoubtedly reflect the enduring influence of traditional rational comprehensive planning approaches which have been underpinned by enlightenment principles such as rationality, comprehensiveness and scientific objectivity (see Sandercock, 1998), we suggest that the context within which the respondents are enmeshed may also offer further insights in this regard (Lennon, 2014). Specifically, within Irish planning education, academia and policy circles, there has been a foregrounding of evidence-based planning with the concomitant implication that planning can be conducted in an objective manner. Moreover, and as suggested by Fox-Rogers and Murphy (2015),

the emphasis on neutrality amongst the planners interviewed may also be particularly pronounced as Irish planners may want to distance themselves from the malpractices associated with a planning system which has been exposed as being systemically corrupt (G.o.I, 2012). In doing so, Irish planners may seek to advance planning practice as an impartially executed endeavour wherein the profession reflects the public good by objectively implementing the policies determined by a publically elected council. Accordingly, the planner must determine a moral code applicable to their work that would enable them to counter any potential for subjectivity that would adversely affect their ability to impartially fulfil their professional role. In a Foucaultian sense, the planner must identify a 'mode of subjection'.

### **Mode of Subjection**

Determining a moral code commensurate with the desire to address the 'ethical substance' of potential bias in decision-making means that the planning profession has sought to locate a means for assisting 'neutral' arbitration. Thus, a recurrent theme in interviewee responses when questioned regarding how the common good is determined in a planning context was the view that planning involves the application of a seemingly impartial framework to decision-making. This denotes the lingering appeal of 'technical rationality' (Owens et al., 2004: 1947) in a 'regime of truth' predicated on the possibility of objectively determining what the public good entails in a given decision situation. One interviewee who had considerable experience in terms of both policy development and implementation succinctly conveyed the perceived moral common-sense of this approach when asserting what he believed the common good entails:

*I think it should be self-evident- In the interest of the public. And what is the interest of the public; the public interest is collectively of the public not the interests of the individual within the public. It's in the interests of the collective and its entirety. (Executive Planner, Development Management and Forward Planning Experience)*

Or as asserted by another planner,

*The common good is in the best interests of the population as a whole, so you kind of accept that it's not going to suit all people. But it should be in the interests of society rather than an individual community, and it's also in the best interests environmentally, socially. (Executive Planner, Forward Planning)*

Others echoed this view by providing illustrative hypothetical examples of how this moral code may be applied in planning practice. For example, one senior planner whose expertise lies in the area of developing planning policies largely through the development plan making process suggested that on some occasions,

*You have to weigh certain issues more. I mean dealing with say a residential group or a community and a councillor who may be representing them, that are completely against, and probably often sometimes for good reasons, for example a waste water treatment plant expansion. They will fight it, fight it, fight it and absolutely so. But there is a greater good that you have to look at and pull that back and say from a strategic point of view, this may be a bit crap for you, we'll find a way of compensating [you], whether it's a community levy or whatever it is, and try and ameliorate as many impacts as possible. But at the end of the day, these things have to go ahead and they have to go ahead for the sake of everybody in the city you know, and it can't be just localised. (Senior Executive Planner, Forward Planning)*

Hence, a widely shared and seemingly objective 'moral code' is advanced in seeking to address the 'ethical substance' of a planner's potential for subjective judgement. From a Foucaultian perspective, the deployment of this moral code may be interpreted as a desire to resonate with the contemporary 'regime of truth' rooted in the logic of 'technical rationality' that governs the allocation of power/knowledge in the practice of professional planning (Flyvbjerg, 1998; Lennon, 2014; Owens et al., 2004). Several interviewees mentioned this self-awareness as a 'professional', with one planner who has worked in variety of roles throughout the course of their career summarily noting that,

*You are a professional member of staff in the local authority and that's key in the role of the planner- that you're keeping that in mind all the*

*time. That you're there as a professional; you're employed as a professional person to recommend based on your assessment of what constitutes proper planning and sustainable development. (Senior Executive Planner, Development Management and Forward Planning experience)*

Instantiating this morally informed concept of professionalism in planning therefore necessitates an interpretation on how a moral code focused on prioritising the advancement of rational objectivity is applied in practice. Accordingly, attention must be allocated to the activities planners perform when seeking to ensure their impartiality. In this sense, focus is required on what Foucault termed 'self-forming activities'.

### **Self-forming activities**

Self-forming activities comprise the efforts through which subjects endeavour to establish those practices that they believe will enable them to meet their 'moral obligations' in conforming to the 'moral code'. In this sense, self-forming activities constitute the ethical practices that Foucault conceptualises as creating an action-orientated bridge between the 'moral code' and 'moral conduct'. Once again, how interviewees responded to questioning on what they perceived as the common good and what they think is the role of a planner revealed their views regarding those activities they believed necessary for translating into practice the moral requirement to remain neutral. Interviewees sought to guarantee neutrality and thereby advance correct moral conduct by ensuring that they remained impartial in their planning activities yet attentive to the potential adverse impacts on the broader population. This view was illustrated by one executive planner when relating that,

*You have to be really careful to remain obviously impartial. So if you have a development that meets all the planning regulations but there are impacts there from a community point of view, they have to be valid and reasonable obviously, very valid or reasonable points of objection and so on. I mean, I don't think about the developer as such. I see an application. I see a building. I don't see a person but I do see the*

*people who would be directly affected by it. (Executive Planner, Development Management and Forward Planning Experience)*

This need to 'remain obviously impartial' was echoed by several of the interviewees, with many laying emphasis on how all parties involved in a planning application should be treated equally. Such a belief was succinctly conveyed by an executive planner working in the area of development management when asserting,

*I'm not going to give a planning consultant more weight than Johnny who wrote his own submission or Mary who wrote her own submission. But that's fine. I would consider those with equal weight, equal value. (Executive Planner, Development Management)*

A clear pattern that emerged from the interviews was the perception that central to forging this sense of professional impartiality was the need to remain consistent in one's planning work. As relayed by one interviewee,

*I think as a planner what I find is very important when you're dealing with planning applications is the fact that if I recommend a grant or refusal for a certain type of development or a certain element of development then I need to be consistent. I don't want somebody coming up to me and saying, 'oh you granted [permission] for something and not for this one here', and if I don't have a reason for that, that's when I think I would have failed the common good. It's consistency [that] is very important. (Executive Planner, Development Management and Forward Planning experience)*

This perceived necessity to promote consistency in planning spans both the development management and policy formulation activities of planners, such that most respondents expressed a view resonant with the statement that, 'We have to be consistent with our plans and policies, and that's consistent across the board' (Interviewee P16). Hence, the idea of consistency is interlaced with neutrality in the sense that being consistently impartial is seen as the means to exemplify good moral conduct in one's professional planning activities. Thus, the self-aware practice of consistent impartiality is a self-forming activity. Such steadfast neutrality therefore constitutes the aim or 'telos' of planning activities by representing the ideal state

aspired for in 'self-forming activities' wherein the morally problematic 'ethical substance' of potential subjectivity is resolved.

### **Telos**

According to Foucault, the 'telos' of an ethical system is 'the kind of being to which we aspire when we behave in a moral way' (Foucault, 1984a: 355). This telos or end state of correct moral being thereby represents how planners envisage themselves as operating when they have resolved the potential for problematic subjectivity in their activities ('ethical substance') by engaging in 'self-forming activities' guided by a 'moral code'. For most of those interviewed this comprised a situation where planners consistently and impartially 'implement the policies and objectives of the development plan as adopted by the elected members' (Interviewee P17). Thus, there was accord among respondents that the telos of the planner is to be an instrument for the objective application of policy made by elected representatives of the community over which planners exercise their powers as impartial adjudicators. This opinion was summarised by one senior planner with experience in both development management and policy formulation, when he concluded that,

*The role of the planner is to, well it's to reflect policy and to lead policy.*

*The planner is there to execute the policy of a democratically elected chamber with the plan...It's [the planner] there as an ambassador of democracy to implement policy made by, in theory, the people through the councillors. It is to seek the public good obviously. It is to juggle competing demands or competing points of view. Now most planners wouldn't disagree with that. (Senior Executive Planner, Development Management and Forward Planning experience)*

Therefore, the morally consummate planner is one who can juggle the multiple and often competing demands and perspectives placed on them in a manner that advances the public good and performs their professional duties in applying policy authorised by democratic processes. In tracing backwards this chain of moral reasoning it is thereby possible to identify how planners aspire to a state where they can effortlessly exemplify consistent impartial judgement. This is facilitated through self-forming activities guided by a moral code that prioritises the perceived need to

advance objectivity in one's professional practice. The practices informed by this moral code thereby enable them to remedy the perceived morally problematic issue of subjectivity by ensuring that their planning work is conducted from a neutral standpoint. The fact that operating from a position of neutrality serves to preserve, rather than redress, imbalances of power within the planning system appears to go unnoticed by those who emphasise the importance of remaining impartial during the decision-making process. The next section extends this analysis through an in-depth Foucaultian interpretation of this interview material. Particular attention is allocated to the operation of power in and through the work of planners. Potentially problematic ethical issues are identified and a remedy for these is offered via a Foucaultian approach to ethics.

## **Power and the Moral Subject**

The above Foucaultian analysis of how ethics operates in and through planning facilitates an examination of how the planner as 'subject' is 'made'. Importantly, this analysis enables an exploration of the effects engendered by the constitution of such a subject. This is because a Foucaultian analysis pays attention to how we occupy the subject positions that our socio-historical location presents to us. These positions are influenced by the concepts of legitimacy operative within a particular context. A key qualification for legitimacy in contemporary professional practice is the capacity to present arguments grounded in what are perceived as valid forms of knowledge (Cowell and Lennon, 2014; Litfin, 1994; Steffek, 2009). This is because legitimate governance in modern western democracies is set against the backdrop of the Enlightenment's legacy wherein the possession of valid forms of knowledge is a prerequisite for authoritatively pronouncing on an issue (Fischer, 2003; 2009). Such 'valid' forms of knowledge habitually partition the world into apparently self-evident dichotomies of true and false, objective and subjective. Furthermore, those in a position to enunciate such knowledge are likely to assume identities constituted by power relationships, and enjoy relative to others, the ability to legitimise decisions made (Foucault, 1980a). In this way, the 'regime of truth' delimiting power/knowledge in modern western democracies, and thus the power to govern in

such contexts, is set in an ability to underpin governing activity by an appeal to knowledge which appears to have been conceived in accordance with the rules of such modernist rationalities (Aronowitz, 1988; Gane, 2004; Weber, 1922).<sup>ii</sup> As a governing activity that ‘attempts to manage spatial change’ (Tewdwr-Jones, 2012: 1), planning is legitimised by a ‘knowledge dependence’ (Gottweis, 2003: 256) grounded on the ‘valid’ knowledge of objective assessment. Thus, as demonstrated above, the evacuation of potential bias is seen as a precondition for the appropriate exercise of power in planning. Consequently, despite much criticism of ‘technical-rational’ planning (Cowell and Lennon, 2014; Fischer, 2003; Flyvbjerg, 1998; Owens and Cowell, 2011) and efforts to move beyond it from a variety of often contending theoretical perspectives (Campbell, 2012b; Davoudi, 2015; Forester, 2013; Flyvbjerg, 2004; Gunder and Hillier, 2009; Healey, 2005; Hillier, 2007), the persistence of this approach seems deeply rooted in the perceived necessity to legitimise the role of the planner by way of self-presentation as a neutral adjudicator (Lennon, 2014).

This technical-rational approach is reflected in the moral code deployed in the ‘self-forming activities’ of planning practice which enables planners to present themselves as disinterested experts deploying their knowledge in objectively seeking to advance the common good when making decisions or driving policy development. Of note here is how this engenders an implicit belief that the activities undertaken by planners are ethically secure. This thereby engenders an ethically static practice wherein the telos of an ‘aspired state of being’ is conflated with the existing ontological condition of the planner. Here, consistency in the maintenance of what is believed to be impartial judgment is considered all that is required to ensure a morally justifiable practice. Accordingly, there is no perceived need for ethical reflection beyond the boundaries of maintaining rational detachment in one’s planning work. In essence, the telos of the planner is deemed to have been reached. However, such a view is problematic given that several authors have shown how planners regularly adopt ethical stances informed by subjective values at odds with those ostensibly presented as legitimising ‘objective’ planning expertise (Lennon, 2015; Parkinson et al., 2016; Thomas, 1994; Upton, 2002). Consequently, failure to acknowledge the role played by subjectivity in planning activity may close the space

for critical attention to the moral assumptions underpinning planning practice. As a result, certain interests aligned with the subjective preferences of planners may be privileged in decision-making, even as the decision-making process is presented as a disinterested technical-rational procedure (Flyvbjerg, 1998; Fox-Rogers and Murphy, 2014).

At the heart of this issue is the foregrounding of ‘moral obligations’ with the concomitant neglect of ‘ethical obligations’. As *moral obligations* merely refer to the bivalence of good or bad moral conduct relative to a moral code, they reinforce the seemingly self-evident dichotomies of true and false that resonate with assumptions concerning the possibility of objective detachment in one’s planning practice. A focus on fulfilling moral obligations thereby helps to sustain the technical-rational modes of practice that are thought to adequately ensure good moral conduct. In contrast, *ethical obligations* reference the nuanced reflection upon how to exemplify moral conduct rather than simply to conform to a pre-ordained moral code. As such, a greater emphasis on ethical obligations offers an opportunity to address the moral shortcomings resultant from ethical inertia in planning. This is because stressing ethical obligations would help rupture the conflation of the ontology of the planner with the telos of the planner that has occurred consequent on a preoccupation with moral obligations. Such rupturing would open a space for the more subtle reflection on one’s relative location within a field of historically contingent power relations. Hence, emphasising ethical obligations may help planners recognise the inevitably context-informed subjectivity of their perspectives (Campbell, 2006). This would thereby stimulate debate on the telos of a planner as theorists and practitioners seek to identify self-forming activities that facilitate a ‘knowing practice’ (Kemmis, 2005) of conscious ethical development<sup>iii</sup>.

From a Foucaultian perspective, such a self-reflective practice involves negotiating a path through the pervasive relations of power that constrain our thinking and doing. Such a path can be located consequent on Foucault’s rejection of the ‘oppressive hypothesis’ (Foucault, 1990: 7-8) by contending that power can enable innovative thought and action. This positive potential of power can be exercised by identifying

and emphasising those emancipatory norms and institutions which assist the emergence of new self-forming activities that facilitate reflection on the very processes by which we are 'made' subjects. The freedom to engage in such ethical reflection is made possible by the very nature of how power is understood by Foucault as an immanent force in all relationships. Specifically, all power relations must presuppose freedom, as these relations are only conceivable on the premise that through resistance to the force of power, a form of freedom is possible<sup>iv</sup>. Thus, the freedom for the possibility of resistance that is an essential condition for the presence of power supplies us with scope to contemplate the influence of such power upon us, our peers and our society. Hence, through resisting 'the given' in social relations, we are free to seek alternative ways of thinking and doing. Such freedom is an inherent attribute of Foucault's understanding of how power and ethics are intrinsically connected. As he notes, 'Freedom is the ontological condition of ethics. But ethics is the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection' (Foucault, 1997: 284). Accordingly, ethical engagement involves seeking to enhance one's freedom from those norms that inhibit self-awareness on how one is constituted as a subject through the context-contingent alignment of power relations. This critique enables us to unmask, understand, and thereby consciously change for the better, the 'ontology of the present' (Foucault, 1986: 96). As Foucault argued in one of his final essays,

*The critical ontology of ourselves...has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.*  
(Foucault, 1984c: 50)

This critical attention to how we are constituted as subjects and how we seek to constitute our subjectivity thus necessitates that we discard the context insensitive notions of objective self-knowledge inherited from the Enlightenment's 'Cartesian moment' (Foucault, 2005: 14).

## **Conclusion**

This paper has advanced the view that ethical issues are at the heart of planning. In doing so it has sought to identify what it means for a sample of planners operative in an Irish context to conduct themselves morally in their professional activities. Specifically, the paper deployed Foucaultian theory to explore how and why the planner is constituted as an ethical subject, and the effects this exerts on the practice of planning. The paper accords with Foucault's own direction that his later examination of ethics be used as a lens through which to read his earlier analysis of power and knowledge. Hence, the paper complements but does not duplicate existing 'governmentality' studies that seek to demonstrate how understanding the 'conduct of conduct' (Foucault, 1983: 220) is essential to comprehending how the management of behaviour is influenced by a multiplicity of context specific influences emanating from an array of heterogeneous sources (Certomà, 2015; Huxley, 2006; Lemke, 2012; Pløger, 2008). The paper extends this work to make an original contribution to planning theory by employing aspects of Foucault's oeuvre not normally referenced in planning literature. In particular, the paper endeavours to demonstrate the value of Foucault's later work on ethics as a conceptual lens for examining how the constitution of the moral self influences the practice of planning.

By demonstrating how moral self-understanding is always positioned within a context that could have been otherwise, this critique requires that planners forsake the self-deception that they can consistently perform their activities with impartiality. Instead, it demands that planners acknowledge how they cannot evade 'situated ethical judgement' (Campbell, 2006) that is positioned within a 'regime of truth' consequent on an historically contingent arrangement of power. Such a 'knowing practice' (Kemmis, 2005) necessitates that self-understanding, moral codes, self-forming activities and the telos towards which one aims are located 'within' particular practice configurations, and hence are inherently provisional. Relinquishing such pretensions to neutrality does not mean that we lose the capacity to justify moral norms and ethical evaluations. What it means is that we recognise how our forms of moral reasoning, and consequently our self-perceptions as moral

subjects, are shaped by our position within a field of power/knowledge. While such recognition would surely deflate the power of moral certainty in planning, and may consequently temper its privileged position, this recognition would concurrently inflate the aptitude of planners to distinguish the ways that power works in marginalising certain perspectives (Grange, 2013). As such, this recognition would supply planners with the tools of immanent critique that may enable them to attune their practices in ways that supplant the ethical passivity of Panglossian self-interpretations with a commitment to moral improvement. Hence, a critically self-reflective approach to the interactions between power and the moral subject offers an opportunity to enhance the ethical sensitivity of planning.

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<sup>i</sup> Semi-structured qualitative interviews were carried out with 20 local authority planners to obtain views relating to 'the role of the planner' and opinions regarding both the importance of the 'common good' justification for planning and on what may constitute the common good in planning.

All interviewees were drawn from four separate planning authorities in the Great Dublin Area, Ireland. These local authorities were selected on the basis that they provided a spectrum of planning contexts, socioeconomic profiles and geographic locations comprising, inner urban, suburban and rural contexts. Non-probability sampling methods were used to identify interviewees in each of the local authorities. Variations in the employment grade of interviewees was sought to counter the potential for sample bias. To further ensure against potential of sample bias, a relatively even mix of planners from different divisions of each planning authority were interviewed. Specifically, interviewees were sourced from those working within the development management and forward planning (policy development) divisions of each of the local authorities. In all, 13 planners were interviewed with development management experience while 12 were interviewed with forward planning experience – 5 planners had experience spanning both development management and forward planning. Care was also given to ensure that there was no gender bias in the data collected, with 9 male and 11 female planners being interviewed in total. All interviews were approximately 60 minutes in duration. 'In vivo' codes derived from words/phrases used by respondents were employed in the analysis of the interview material. Consequently, the coding scheme was data-driven. All coding was undertaken by one of this paper's authors, thereby enhancing consistency in the coding procedure and the robustness of the data analysis process.

<sup>ii</sup> Flyvbjerg (1998) extends this idea by showing that it is the 'appearance' of such rationalities rather than a genuine concern with their use that is important in power-imbued governing activity.

<sup>iii</sup> Davoudi (2015) has also provided a cogent justification from a more pragmatic philosophical perspective on the need to conceptualise 'planning as practice of knowing'.

<sup>iv</sup> This is an important issue in Foucault's later writings that many of those who accuse him of a deterministic reading of subjectivity fail to recognise. Such critics generally do not acknowledge how Foucault believed that his later writings on ethics, freedom and subjectivity were essentially addressing issues he had only partially explained in his earlier works on power, discipline and knowledge. See Flynn (2010) for a further discussion of this issue.