Pain as a Disciplinary and Self-Disciplinary Practice that Defines Female Status in St. Augustine, Michel Foucault, and Post-Structural Feminist Thought

*Pain has frequently occupied a marginal position within philosophical inquiry, treated either as a physiological sensation or as an interruption of rational agency. This article argues instead that pain should be understood as a historically situated practice through which subjects are constituted. Adopting a genealogical approach, it brings the theology of Augustine, Michel Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power, and post-structural feminist philosophy into critical dialogue in order to trace the historical transformation of pain as a technology of subject formation. While Augustine conceptualizes pain within a providential moral economy and Foucault analyses its secularization through modern disciplinary institutions, post-structural feminist theory reveals the gendered and intersectional conditions that organize the distribution, interpretation, and recognition of suffering. Building on these traditions, the article advances the concept of **pain as a gendered technology of subjectivation** to explain how embodied suffering functions in the production of ethical, disciplinary, and gendered subjects. It argues that pain is productive not because suffering possesses intrinsic moral value, but because historically specific regimes of power mobilize embodied vulnerability to shape forms of self-government, normative embodiment, and social recognition. By repositioning pain at the intersection of embodiment, power, and feminist epistemology, the article contributes to contemporary debates on subjectivity, normativity, and agency, while demonstrating the value of genealogy as a feminist philosophical method for analysing the historical organization of embodied experience.*

Keywords: *pain; subjectivation; Augustine; Michel Foucault; feminist philosophy; embodiment; genealogy; disciplinary power; gender; normativity.*

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Introduction

Pain has occupied an uncertain position within the history of philosophy. While it has been examined within moral theology, phenomenology, philosophy of medicine, and political theory, it has frequently remained conceptually secondary to questions of reason, agency, and rational autonomy. Pain is commonly understood either as a physiological sensation requiring medical explanation or as a subjective experience that interrupts purposeful action. Even when suffering acquires ethical significance, philosophical inquiry has often treated it as the consequence of moral, political, or social processes rather than as a constitutive practice through which subjects themselves are formed.

This article proposes a different approach. Rather than asking what pain is, it asks what pain does. It argues that pain should be understood genealogically as a historically situated practice through which authority becomes embodied, norms are internalized, and subjects are constituted. Pain is therefore not

approached as a timeless human experience but as a productive technology operating within historically specific regimes of power. Its significance lies not in any intrinsic moral value of suffering but in the ways institutional, theological, and cultural practices mobilize embodied vulnerability in order to organize conduct, shape desire, and produce socially intelligible forms of subjectivity.

This argument draws upon Michel Foucault's conception of genealogy, which rejects linear histories of ideas in favour of analysing the contingent historical formations through which concepts, practices, and forms of subjectivity emerge. Genealogy does not seek the origin or essence of pain. Instead, it examines how different historical configurations invest suffering with distinct meanings and political functions. Pain is therefore approached as an effect of historically specific relations between bodies, institutions, knowledge, and power. At the same time, the article extends Foucauldian genealogy by incorporating feminist philosophical perspectives that reveal how disciplinary practices are never socially neutral but are always mediated through gendered, embodied, and intersectional conditions of recognition.

Although Augustine, Michel Foucault, and post-structural feminist philosophers belong to profoundly different intellectual traditions, they share a common concern with the relationship between authority, embodiment, and subject formation. Augustine situates pain within a theological economy of salvation in which suffering disciplines desire, reorders love, and participates in the formation of the Christian self. Foucault secularizes this logic by demonstrating how modern disciplinary institutions redistribute pain through practices of surveillance, normalization, examination, and self-regulation. Post-structural feminist philosophy subsequently exposes the gendered organization of these disciplinary mechanisms by showing that pain is unequally distributed, interpreted, and recognized across differently situated bodies. Read genealogically, these traditions illuminate successive historical transformations of pain without implying either conceptual identity or direct historical continuity. The concern of the present study is therefore neither influence nor intellectual genealogy in the conventional sense, but the changing historical conditions through which embodied suffering becomes productive of subjectivity.

The central claim advanced here is that pain functions as a gendered technology of subjectivation. This concept constitutes the principal theoretical contribution of the article. By "technology of subjectivation," I refer to historically organized practices through which individuals come to govern themselves according to socially legitimate norms. Pain contributes to this process because it renders authority affectively compelling, disciplines bodily conduct, shapes emotional dispositions, and mediates relations of recognition. Yet these processes are never uniformly distributed. Feminist philosophy demonstrates that expectations concerning endurance, bodily regulation, emotional labour, self-sacrifice, and vulnerability have historically been assigned unevenly across gendered bodies while intersecting with race, class, sexuality, disability, and other relations of power. Pain is therefore productive not because suffering possesses universal ethical significance, but because

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historically specific normative regimes repeatedly organize whose suffering becomes meaningful, whose vulnerability is recognized, and whose endurance is morally valued.

This argument also addresses an important gap within existing scholarship. Studies of Augustine have primarily examined suffering within theological, ethical, or pastoral frameworks, whereas Foucauldian analyses typically investigate pain in relation to punishment, discipline, or biopolitics. Feminist philosophers, meanwhile, have demonstrated how embodied suffering is inseparable from gendered norms governing appearance, reproduction, care, affect, and recognition. Yet relatively little work has systematically reconstructed the historical relations connecting these traditions in order to explain how pain functions as a productive practice of subject formation across theological, disciplinary, and feminist contexts. The present article seeks to provide such a genealogy while remaining attentive to the discontinuities separating these intellectual formations.

The methodological approach adopted throughout is intentionally interdisciplinary. It combines philosophical genealogy with conceptual analysis and feminist critical theory. The objective is neither to provide an exhaustive history of pain nor to offer close textual exegesis of Augustine or Foucault. Instead, selected concepts are reconstructed in order to illuminate a broader historical transformation in the organization of embodied suffering. The article therefore proceeds through a series of conceptual encounters rather than chronological reconstructions, allowing theological, philosophical, and feminist perspectives to illuminate one another while preserving their historical specificity.

The article unfolds in four stages. The first part examines Augustine's account of pain as a practice of moral formation, emphasizing the productive role of ascetic discipline, confession, interiority, and rightly ordered love in the constitution of the Christian subject. The second part turns to Foucault's genealogy of disciplinary power, arguing that modern institutions do not eliminate pain but secularize and redistribute it through techniques of normalization, surveillance, and self-government. The third part analyses post-structural feminist philosophy, drawing particularly upon Judith Butler, Susan Bordo, Sandra Lee Bartky, Sara Ahmed, Miranda Fricker, and related feminist thinkers to demonstrate how disciplinary pain is historically organized through gendered and intersectional norms of embodiment, recognition, and epistemic authority. Building upon these analyses, the final chapter develops the concept of pain as a gendered technology of subjectivation, arguing that embodied suffering constitutes one of the principal historical mechanisms through which ethical, disciplinary, and gendered subjects are simultaneously produced.

By repositioning pain at the intersection of embodiment, power, and feminist epistemology, this article contributes to several contemporary philosophical debates. It expands genealogical analyses of subjectivity beyond the institutional history of discipline by recovering their theological antecedents; it reinterprets Augustine as an important figure within the longer history of subjectivation without collapsing theological and secular frameworks; and it

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contributes to feminist philosophy by conceptualizing pain not simply as an object of ethical concern but as a historically organized practice through which bodies become disciplined, recognized, and politically intelligible. Ultimately, the genealogy developed here argues that pain is neither merely suffered nor merely inflicted. It is historically produced, institutionally organized, affectively mediated, and differentially distributed. Understanding pain in these terms reveals not only how subjects come to inhabit normative forms of embodiment but also how those very norms remain open to critical interrogation and political transformation.

Pain, Ordo Amoris, and the Moral Formation of the Christian Subject

St. Augustine develops one of the most influential theological accounts of pain in the Western tradition, whose philosophical significance extends beyond Christian doctrine. Rather than treating pain as a merely physiological event or an inevitable consequence of human finitude, Augustine situates suffering within a moral anthropology governed by divine providence. Throughout the *Confessions*, *De doctrina christiana*, and *The City of God*, bodily suffering forms part of God's redemptive economy, through which disordered desire is gradually reoriented toward its proper end in God (Augustine, 1991, Books VII–X; Augustine, 1995, I.22–28; Augustine, 1998, Books XI–XIV). Pain thus participates actively in moral transformation rather than merely accompanying it.

Central to Augustine's moral anthropology is the principle of *ordo amoris*, the right ordering of love. Human beings sin not because they love created goods, but because they love them disproportionately, elevating finite realities above the Creator (Augustine, 1995, I.27–28; Augustine, 1998, XV.22; XIX.13). Moral disorder is therefore primarily affective rather than juridical: the will is shaped by the orientation of its loves. Pain reveals this disorder by disrupting the illusion of self-sufficiency, exposing the instability of worldly attachments, and directing the subject toward dependence upon divine grace (Augustine, 1991, VII.16–17; X.27–29). As Rowan Williams (2016) observes, Augustine understands human identity as emerging through conversion rather than autonomous self-possession. Pain therefore acquires an epistemic function by disclosing the moral orientation of the will.

Augustine also rejects any account that reduces suffering to divine punishment. Although pain enters history through the Fall, its significance extends beyond retribution (Augustine, 1998, XIII.13–15). It disciplines pride, exposes the fragility of self-reliance, and creates the conditions for the reorientation of the will toward God. The body thus becomes the site of ethical transformation rather than an obstacle to it. Spiritual formation occurs through embodied vulnerability, and pain functions less as a penalty than as a formative practice through which embodied existence acquires ethical significance.

Augustine's enduring philosophical contribution lies less in his theology of suffering than in the model of subject formation it presupposes. Pain is productive because it participates in the constitution of the Christian subject through practices of interpretation, self-examination, confession, and moral

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discipline (Augustine, 1991, X.3–5; X.33–43). Divine authority operates through its gradual interiorization, transforming external regulation into self-regulation. Read genealogically, Augustine thus offers an early model of subjectivation in which authority is embodied through affective discipline and practices of self-governance, providing a theological grammar that precedes later analyses of disciplinary power.

Voluntary Pain and Ascetic Practice

The productive character of pain becomes particularly evident in Augustine's account of ascetic discipline. Whereas involuntary suffering reveals the fallen condition of humanity, voluntary bodily renunciation participates in the transformation of desire. Practices such as fasting, celibacy, vigils, and silence are valued not because pain possesses intrinsic moral worth, but because they cultivate an ordered relation between the will and its proper object of love (Augustine, 1991, VIII.11–12; Augustine, 1998, XIV.12–15). The body is disciplined not because it is evil, but because desire requires formation.

Augustine's asceticism should therefore not be interpreted as bodily hostility or theological dualism. Rather, it presupposes a dynamic conception of embodiment in which the body becomes the medium of ethical transformation. As Sarah Coakley (2002) argues, early Christian asceticism is better understood as the reconfiguration of desire than its repression. Voluntary pain thus functions less as self-punishment than as an embodied practice through which subjects cultivate attention, restraint, and ethical freedom.

Ascetic discipline reshapes habitual desires and forms dispositions such as humility, patience, and self-restraint. Its significance depends not on the intensity of suffering but on its orientation within Augustine's providential order. Agency and obedience are therefore mutually constitutive: the subject learns self-government through the disciplined reorientation of desire toward a transcendent normative order.

Augustine nevertheless insists that ascetic discipline requires discernment and ecclesiastical guidance (Augustine, 1991, X.29–43). Voluntary suffering pursued without humility risks becoming spiritual pride rather than genuine transformation. Pain is thus never simply a private experience but remains embedded within communal practices of interpretation and moral authority. Its ethical significance is always socially mediated, anticipating a theme that becomes central to the feminist genealogy developed later in this article.

Confession, Interiority, and the Interiorization of Authority

If ascetic discipline constitutes the practical dimension of Augustine's account of pain, confession provides its epistemological counterpart. Pain becomes productive insofar as it is interpreted. Within Augustine's theological anthropology, suffering acquires ethical significance not simply because it is endured but because it is rendered intelligible through practices of self-examination, confession, and repentance. Confession is therefore more than the

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verbal acknowledgment of sin; it is a transformative practice through which the subject learns to recognize, interpret, and govern the self before God (Augustine, 1991, X.1–5; X.33–43). The articulation of suffering thus becomes inseparable from the articulation of desire, memory, and moral identity.

Confession also transforms the relation between authority and subjectivity. Divine authority operates not primarily through external command but through the subject's interpretive engagement with the state of the soul. Augustine thereby establishes a form of moral knowledge grounded in introspection rather than external observation. As Foucault (1988) later argues in his analyses of early Christian technologies of the self, confession inaugurates a mode of subjectivation in which individuals actively participate in producing truth about themselves. Although Augustine's theological project differs fundamentally from Foucault's genealogy of power, both illuminate historical forms through which authority becomes effective by shaping the subject's relation to the self.

Confession simultaneously renders pain communicable within an ecclesial community structured by practices of interpretation and judgment. Through penance, suffering is incorporated into concrete disciplines that reorient desire toward divine order and cultivate habits of obedience, humility, and ethical attentiveness (Augustine, 1991, IX.1–3; X.29–43). Pain thus mediates the relationship between individual conscience and ecclesiastical authority, gradually transforming moral obligation into self-regulation.

Augustine's account ultimately shows that the disciplinary force of pain depends upon its incorporation into interpretive practices. Suffering acquires ethical significance not because it possesses intrinsic moral value but because institutional frameworks authorize particular meanings of embodied experience. The Christian subject therefore learns not only to endure pain but also to understand it within a normative grammar of repentance, virtue, and moral transformation.

Memory, Affect, and the Formation of the Interior Self

Augustine's account of confession is inseparable from his broader theory of interiority. In the *Confessions*, bodily suffering repeatedly occasions an inward movement toward memory, conscience, and self-reflection (Augustine, 1991, Book X). Pain interrupts ordinary engagement with the external world and redirects attention to the interior life, where memory functions not merely as the repository of past experience but as the space in which the self becomes morally intelligible. Augustine's exploration of memory is therefore less a psychological inquiry than an investigation into the conditions through which the subject comes to know and transform itself before God.

Within this framework, affect plays a central role in moral formation. Augustine rejects any strict division between cognition and emotion: love, fear, sorrow, hope, shame, and joy are formative orientations of the will rather than passive emotional states. Pain disciplines not only bodily conduct but also the affective life, cultivating dispositions that orient desire toward divine truth. Its ethical significance lies in reshaping the emotional economy of the self, making

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humility, repentance, and longing for God enduring habits rather than episodic experiences (Augustine, 1991, X.26–40).

Augustine's emphasis on affect broadens his account of discipline by showing that subject formation involves not only the regulation of conduct but also the transformation of perception, desire, and moral judgment. As James K. A. Smith (2019) argues, Augustine portrays human beings as shaped primarily by the habits of their loves rather than by abstract rational deliberation. Read genealogically, this account suggests that the cultivation of affect is as fundamental to subject formation as bodily discipline.

This insight also anticipates an important theme of the feminist genealogy developed later in this article. Although Augustine neither theorizes gender nor critiques relations of domination, he reveals an early historical configuration in which embodied suffering, affect, and moral identity are bound together through the interiorization of normative authority. In this respect, the technologies of subjectivation later analysed by Foucault and reworked by feminist philosophers possess theological antecedents that extend beyond the institutional history of modern disciplinary power.

Authority, Gender, and the Ambivalence of Pain

The preceding analysis shows that Augustine's theology of pain extends beyond individual spirituality to a broader moral anthropology in which embodied suffering serves as a medium of subject formation. The Christian subject is constituted not only through belief but through practices cultivating obedience, humility, self-restraint, and endurance. Although these virtues are presented as universal, their historical reception demonstrates that they are neither socially neutral nor politically innocent. Rather, they become embedded within cultural practices through which disciplined embodiment acquires moral legitimacy.

This legacy is particularly significant for feminist philosophy. Augustine neither theorizes gender nor offers a direct account of patriarchal domination. Nevertheless, the virtues privileged within his moral anthropology—submission, bodily discipline, self-denial, and patient endurance—later become disproportionately associated with feminine subjectivity in Christian moral discourse and its institutional legacies. From a genealogical perspective, this should not be understood as a relation of direct causality but of conceptual continuity. Augustine provides an ethical vocabulary through which bodily discipline becomes morally intelligible before later acquiring explicitly gendered forms. Pain thus emerges as a socially mediated practice through which historically specific forms of embodiment are produced.

At the same time, Augustine recognizes the limits of disciplinary suffering. Throughout the *Confessions*, pain is never intrinsically virtuous or automatically redemptive; its ethical significance depends upon grace, discernment, rightly ordered love, and continual self-examination (Augustine, 1991, X.29–43). Suffering may cultivate humility, but it may equally foster despair, resentment, or spiritual pride when detached from its proper orientation. Augustine therefore

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resists any simple glorification of pain, emphasizing instead its profound moral ambivalence.

This ambivalence constitutes Augustine's most enduring contribution to the genealogy developed here. Pain is neither inherently oppressive nor inherently emancipatory; its ethical and political significance depends upon the normative frameworks through which it is interpreted. In this respect, Augustine provides not a timeless theology of suffering but an historically situated account of how authority becomes embodied through discipline, interpretation, and self-transformation.

This perspective also clarifies the transition to Foucault. The continuity between Augustine and Foucault lies not in direct historical influence but in their shared concern with the productive relation between power, embodiment, and subject formation. Whereas Augustine situates this process within a theological economy of salvation, Foucault relocates it within the secular institutions of modernity. What persists across both frameworks is the insight that subjects are constituted through practices that regulate bodies, shape desire, and organize the meaning of suffering.

From Providential Discipline to Disciplinary Power

If Augustine situates pain within a providential economy of salvation, Michel Foucault shows how modernity detaches pain from its theological horizon without abandoning its productive function. Rather than disappearing from modern society, pain is redistributed across institutional practices of observation, normalization, and correction. The transition from Christian moral discipline to modern disciplinary power therefore marks not a rupture but a historical reconfiguration in which the source of authority changes while pain remains central to subject formation.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) traces the transformation of punitive power from the spectacular violence of the sovereign to the diffuse disciplinary mechanisms characteristic of modern institutions. This shift is often interpreted as the replacement of bodily punishment by more humane forms of regulation. Foucault's central insight, however, is that disciplinary power does not eliminate pain but reorganizes its distribution. Public torture gives way to continuous practices of correction in which suffering becomes less visible, more individualized, and embedded within the ordinary routines of institutional life.

The object of power changes accordingly. Whereas sovereign punishment inscribed political authority directly upon the body, modern discipline treats the body as a set of capacities to be trained, optimized, and rendered useful. Pain no longer displays sovereign force but facilitates normalization. Whether experienced as fatigue, anxiety, shame, frustration, or chronic self-monitoring, suffering becomes integrated into everyday practices through which individuals learn to conform to institutional expectations. The body is thus continuously produced as a disciplined and productive subject.

Foucault does not reject Augustine's insight that pain participates in subject formation; rather, he relocates it within a secular analysis of historically

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contingent relations of power. Whereas Augustine interprets suffering through the language of grace and salvation, Foucault analyses it as an effect of disciplinary institutions. The continuity between them lies not in historical influence but in their shared recognition that embodied suffering contributes to the constitution of the subject. Modern disciplinary power therefore secularizes the moral grammar of pain, transforming practices once oriented toward salvation into techniques of normalization, efficiency, and social regulation.

Disciplinary Technologies and the Interiorization of Pain

Foucault identifies three principal mechanisms of disciplinary power: hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, and examination (Foucault, 1977). Although these techniques rarely rely on overt physical violence, they generate distinctive forms of embodied discomfort that function as disciplinary forces. Pain is no longer imposed through spectacular punishment but becomes embedded in the ordinary routines of institutional life.

Hierarchical observation encourages individuals to regulate themselves through the anticipation of surveillance, while normalizing judgment subjects them to continuous comparison and evaluation. Feelings of inadequacy, shame, failure, or exclusion become integral to discipline because deviation from institutional norms is experienced affectively before it is formally sanctioned. Examination combines surveillance and normalization by producing authoritative knowledge about individuals, making them simultaneously objects of observation and subjects of self-assessment.

Pain thus acquires an anticipatory character. Individuals increasingly regulate their own conduct to avoid the discomfort associated with correction, failure, or social invisibility. Disciplinary power operates less through external coercion than through embodied habits of self-regulation, becoming most effective when deviation itself is experienced as painful.

This marks the principal continuity with Augustine. In both theological and disciplinary formations, pain functions as the medium through which authority is internalized, although its source of legitimacy changes. Augustine grounds discipline in divine providence, whereas Foucault locates it within historically contingent institutions and regimes of power/knowledge. Read genealogically, these accounts reveal successive forms of subjectivation in which embodied suffering becomes inseparable from practices of self-government.

The genealogy of pain therefore suggests that modernity does not eliminate suffering but redistributes it. Earlier forms of embodied self-regulation are secularized and extended across schools, prisons, hospitals, factories, and other institutions. What appears as a humanitarian reduction of violence often conceals the emergence of more pervasive disciplinary mechanisms. Pain has not disappeared; it has become diffuse, normalized, and incorporated into the everyday production of disciplined subjects.

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Normative Bodies, Self-Formation, and the Gendering of Discipline

A defining feature of Foucault's genealogy is the inseparable relation between power and knowledge. Modern disciplinary institutions do not simply regulate bodies but produce the forms of knowledge through which bodies become measurable, comparable, and governable (Foucault, 1977). Schools, hospitals, prisons, military institutions, and workplaces establish classificatory systems that define normality through continuous observation and evaluation. Within this epistemic economy, pain functions as an embodied language of normalization: fatigue, anxiety, shame, frustration, and psychological distress signal the body's relation to institutional norms and render subjects intelligible to themselves.

This communicative function extends well beyond explicit punishment. The exhaustion associated with productivity, the anxiety of assessment, or the stress generated by medical surveillance are typically experienced as personal inadequacies rather than as effects of disciplinary power. By translating structural norms into private experiences, disciplinary institutions naturalize their authority while obscuring its historical and political character.

Here, however, the limits of Foucault's genealogy become apparent. Although *Discipline and Punish* offers a powerful account of normalization, its disciplinary subject often appears as though institutional techniques operate uniformly across all bodies. Feminist philosophers have shown instead that this apparently universal subject is implicitly masculine, able-bodied, and detached from the reproductive and affective labour disproportionately performed by women (McWhorter, 1999; Bordo, 1993). The neutrality of disciplinary norms therefore conceals their differential effects.

These limitations become particularly evident when pain is examined from a feminist perspective. Practices of self-surveillance, bodily regulation, and normalization have historically been demanded with greater intensity of women, especially in relation to bodily appearance, caregiving, reproduction, emotional self-management, and sexual respectability. The modern disciplinary body is therefore never gender-neutral; it is constituted through historically specific norms that distribute pain unevenly across different forms of embodiment.

At the same time, Foucault's later writings on ethics and the care of the self (1988) demonstrate that discipline cannot be reduced to domination alone. Practices of self-formation involve labour, repetition, restraint, and the cultivation of new capacities, all of which frequently entail discomfort. This recalls Augustine's account of ascetic discipline, although the normative horizon shifts from salvation to historically contingent practices of self-constitution within relations of power.

Yet this productive understanding of discipline raises a fundamental question: how can pain as domination be distinguished from pain as ethical self-formation? Foucault deliberately leaves this question unresolved. Post-structural feminist philosophy extends his genealogy by demonstrating that both agency and discipline are mediated by gendered, racialized, and socially differentiated conditions of subjectivation. Once pain is understood as a productive practice of

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subject formation, the central issue is no longer whether discipline produces subjects, but which subjects are produced, through which normative regimes, and at whose embodied cost. This question provides the transition to the feminist genealogy developed in the following chapter.

From Discipline to Gendered Subjectivation

If Foucault demonstrates that disciplinary power constitutes subjects through embodied practices of normalization, post-structural feminist philosophy asks a further question: whose bodies bear the costs of disciplinary subjectivation? Rather than rejecting Foucault's productive conception of power, feminist genealogy exposes its historically gendered conditions of possibility. The question is no longer whether pain contributes to subject formation, but how disciplinary pain is differentially distributed across bodies marked by gender, race, sexuality, disability, and class. The history of pain is therefore also a history of differential embodiment.

In this respect, feminist philosophy completes the genealogy developed in the preceding chapters. Augustine located pain within a theological economy of moral formation, while Foucault analysed its redistribution through modern disciplinary institutions. Yet neither adequately explains why disciplinary practices are experienced unevenly across differently situated bodies. Feminist genealogy addresses this omission by showing that subjectivation is never simply disciplinary but always mediated by historically specific norms of embodiment.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity provides a crucial point of departure. Butler argues that gender is not a pre-existing identity but the effect of repeated embodied performances through which social norms become materialized over time (Butler, 1990; 1993). Gendered subjects are therefore constituted through the continual repetition of normative practices rather than expressing an essential identity. This insight extends Foucauldian genealogy by demonstrating that disciplinary power not only regulates bodies but also produces the categories through which bodies become socially intelligible.

Pain occupies a central place within this process. Normative gender is sustained not only through repeated conformity but also through the affective consequences of deviation. Shame, anxiety, vulnerability, exclusion, and bodily discomfort function as regulatory experiences that reinforce gender norms before explicit sanctions become necessary. Pain thus operates as an ordinary mechanism through which gender acquires embodied and affective force. Subjects inhabit socially recognizable forms of embodiment because departure from normative expectations is experienced as emotionally, socially, and often physically costly.

Read genealogically, Butler reveals that the productivity of pain cannot be understood independently of gender. Pain does not simply discipline pre-existing subjects; it participates in the continual materialization of gendered subjectivity and organizes the conditions under which recognition becomes possible. It

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therefore emerges not as a universal mechanism of subject formation but as a gendered technology of subjectivation whose effects depend upon historically specific regimes of power. This insight provides the conceptual foundation for the analyses of feminine discipline and embodied normativity that follow.

Embodied Normativity and the Politics of Endurance

The gendered character of disciplinary pain becomes particularly visible in the everyday practices through which femininity is embodied and reproduced. Whereas Foucault demonstrates that disciplinary power operates through normalization, post-structural feminist philosophy shows that these norms are historically organized around gendered expectations concerning bodily appearance, emotional self-regulation, reproductive responsibility, and endurance. Pain thus emerges not simply as an instrument of discipline but as a condition through which normative femininity is continually produced.

Susan Bordo's analysis of dieting, eating disorders, and body regulation offers a particularly clear illustration of this process. In *Unbearable Weight* (1993), Bordo argues that contemporary ideals of femininity transform hunger, fatigue, restraint, and discomfort into signs of discipline and moral achievement rather than oppression. What appears as individual choice is inseparable from cultural regimes that define acceptable feminine embodiment. Pain becomes productive precisely because disciplinary practices are experienced as expressions of autonomy rather than coercion.

Sandra Lee Bartky similarly argues that femininity is constituted through innumerable micro-practices of bodily regulation involving posture, movement, appearance, emotional expression, and continual self-surveillance (Bartky, 1990). These practices demand sustained effort and self-restraint while rendering their associated discomfort culturally unremarkable. The feminine body is therefore not simply disciplined but historically constituted through embodied labour whose costs are normalized.

Endurance consequently emerges as a political norm. The expectation that women silently tolerate discomfort—whether in relation to beauty practices, reproductive labour, caregiving, or emotional work—reproduces gender hierarchies by translating socially imposed discipline into the language of resilience, responsibility, and moral character. Pain loses its political visibility precisely because it is interpreted as a personal virtue rather than a structural effect of power.

Sara Ahmed further illuminates this process by showing that emotions orient bodies toward particular norms and social possibilities (Ahmed, 2004). Discomfort, shame, fear, and vulnerability are not merely private feelings but affective mechanisms through which bodies learn the limits of normative existence. Pain therefore acquires meaning within historically sedimented emotional economies that determine which forms of suffering become intelligible, acceptable, or desirable.

Taken together, Bordo, Bartky, and Ahmed demonstrate that disciplinary pain is always mediated by gendered norms of embodiment, affect, and

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recognition. Pain is neither an accidental consequence of gender inequality nor a universal feature of human existence; it functions as a historically specific gendered technology of subjectivation through which normative femininity is embodied and sustained.

This perspective also clarifies why the normalization of endurance remains politically significant. The more successfully pain is interpreted as evidence of virtue or self-mastery, the less visible the relations of power that produce it. Feminist genealogy therefore shifts attention from pain as an individual experience to the normative frameworks that authorize its unequal distribution, preparing the discussion of pain as a site of epistemic recognition developed in the following section.

Pain, Testimony, and Epistemic Injustice

The genealogy developed in this article reveals that pain is not only a practice of subject formation but also a site where relations of knowledge and power are negotiated. Post-structural feminist philosophy therefore extends earlier genealogical analyses by asking whose pain is recognized, whose suffering remains unintelligible, and who is acknowledged as a credible knower of embodied experience. Pain emerges not simply as an embodied condition but as an epistemic practice structured by unequal relations of recognition.

Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* (1985) provides an important point of departure. Scarry argues that intense pain resists linguistic representation because it disrupts the ordinary structures through which experience becomes communicable. Yet feminist philosophy demonstrates that this apparent inexpressibility is never purely phenomenological. It is also socially and politically mediated.

Miranda Fricker's concept of epistemic injustice (2007) clarifies this point by showing how relations of power shape the credibility accorded to different knowers. Testimonial injustice undermines the authority of particular speakers, while hermeneutical injustice deprives marginalized groups of the interpretive resources needed to articulate their experiences. Pain is therefore recognized not simply according to its physiological intensity but according to historically situated assumptions about whose testimony counts as credible.

This dynamic is especially evident in feminist analyses of medicine and reproductive embodiment. Experiences associated with menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, endometriosis, chronic pelvic pain, and gynecological procedures have frequently been normalized, psychologized, or dismissed as ordinary features of female embodiment. Women's reports of pain have often been interpreted as emotional exaggeration rather than authoritative knowledge of their own bodies. The unequal recognition of pain therefore constitutes not merely a clinical problem but an epistemic one, revealing how disciplinary power governs the conditions under which embodied knowledge becomes intelligible.

Lisa Guenther's analysis of solitary confinement further demonstrates that pain acquires meaning through relations of social recognition rather than as an

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isolated private sensation (Guenther, 2013). Whether suffering is acknowledged, ignored, or rendered politically invisible depends upon the social conditions through which subjects become recognizable to others. Recognition is therefore not simply an ethical response to pain but one of the conditions that makes pain intelligible in the first place.

These feminist interventions demonstrate that pain does more than discipline bodies. It also organizes the conditions under which embodied experience becomes credible, interpretable, and socially meaningful. The production of disciplined subjects is inseparable from the production of authoritative knowers. Pain thus emerges as a historically situated gendered technology of subjectivation through which bodies are simultaneously governed, interpreted, and recognized within unequal regimes of power. The central philosophical question is no longer simply how pain forms subjects, but whose suffering becomes knowledge and whose remains systematically marginalized.

Ambivalence, Resistance, and the Politics of Pain

Post-structural feminist philosophy insists that pain cannot be understood exclusively as either an instrument of domination or a source of emancipation. Rather, its political significance lies in its ambivalence. As the preceding genealogy has shown, pain forms, disciplines, and renders subjects intelligible within historically specific normative regimes. Feminist theory extends this insight by demonstrating that the same disciplinary practices that reproduce domination may also generate conditions for critique, resistance, and collective transformation. Pain therefore acquires no fixed political meaning independent of the social and historical contexts in which it is interpreted.

This ambivalence follows directly from Judith Butler's account of performativity. Because gender norms depend upon continual repetition, they remain inherently unstable and open to disruption (Butler, 1990; 1993). Pain often exposes the embodied costs of sustaining these norms. Experiences long interpreted as natural or inevitable may become politically transformative once they are collectively articulated and publicly recognized. Feminist consciousness-raising exemplifies this shift by relocating pain from the realm of private endurance to that of shared political critique. Suffering becomes politically productive not because pain is inherently emancipatory, but because its public articulation transforms the interpretive frameworks through which it is understood.

Sara Ahmed further develops this insight by emphasizing the affective dimensions of political life (Ahmed, 2004). Emotions orient bodies toward particular norms, communities, and social possibilities rather than existing as purely private states. Pain simultaneously binds subjects through shared vulnerability and exposes the unequal conditions under which suffering becomes visible, credible, or ignored. Feminist politics therefore requires not only challenging institutions of domination but also transforming the affective economies through which pain is recognized and interpreted.

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The political significance of pain thus lies less in suffering itself than in the social conditions that determine its meaning. Resistance begins when experiences previously normalized as private burdens are reinterpreted as effects of historically contingent relations of power. Read genealogically, pain emerges as a contested site through which domination, recognition, and political agency are continuously negotiated.

Intersectionality, Differential Vulnerability, and the Limits of Universal Subjectivity

The ambivalence of pain cannot be understood apart from the unequal distribution of vulnerability across different forms of embodiment. Contemporary feminist theory demonstrates that gender never operates in isolation but intersects with race, class, sexuality, disability, age, and other historically specific relations of power. Disciplinary pain is therefore never uniformly experienced; it is differentially organized through intersecting normative regimes that shape both vulnerability and the possibilities for resistance.

An intersectional genealogy complicates any generalized account of subjectivation. While some subjects may transform painful experiences into political agency or collective critique, others remain constrained by structural conditions that severely limit such possibilities. Experiences of racialized violence, economic precarity, reproductive injustice, disability, forced migration, and medical neglect demonstrate that vulnerability is itself politically organized. The capacity to resist disciplinary norms cannot be separated from the unequal conditions that determine whose suffering is recognized and whose pain remains systematically marginalized.

From this perspective, feminist genealogy rejects any romanticization of suffering as inherently transformative. Pain possesses no universal emancipatory potential. Its political significance depends upon historically specific relations of power that simultaneously produce vulnerability and regulate the conditions under which vulnerability becomes socially intelligible. The analytical focus therefore shifts from pain as an individual experience to the normative frameworks through which suffering is distributed, interpreted, and legitimized.

An intersectional perspective also reveals the limits of universal models of subjectivity. Pain does not constitute subjects in a uniform manner but through differentiated regimes of embodiment, recognition, and social power. It therefore emerges as a historically situated gendered technology of subjectivation whose effects vary according to the unequal organization of vulnerability across social locations.

This perspective prepares the theoretical synthesis developed in the following chapter. Once pain is understood as the intersection of discipline, embodiment, gender, and epistemic recognition, the central philosophical question is no longer simply how pain forms subjects, but how particular regimes of power determine which subjects become recognizable, whose suffering

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acquires political significance, and under what conditions vulnerability can become a source of resistance rather than continued subordination.

A Genealogy of Subjectivation through Pain

The genealogy developed in this article demonstrates that pain cannot be understood either as a purely physiological sensation or as a merely negative interruption of agency. Rather, pain constitutes one of the most enduring practices through which subjects are historically formed. It organizes embodiment, shapes ethical dispositions, regulates affect, and establishes the conditions under which subjects become socially intelligible. The central claim advanced here is that pain functions as a gendered technology of subjectivation.

This concept captures the historically variable yet structurally persistent processes through which embodied suffering participates in the production of subjects. Pain is never simply endured; it is interpreted, institutionalized, and incorporated into practices of self-formation. Across different historical configurations, it mediates the embodiment of authority, renders norms affectively compelling, and enables subjects to govern themselves according to socially legitimate forms of conduct. What changes historically is not the productive function of pain but the institutional and normative frameworks through which that productivity is organized.

Three interrelated characteristics define pain as a technology of subjectivation. First, pain operates through processes of interiorization. Rather than relying primarily on external coercion, power becomes effective when subjects actively participate in their own regulation. Pain acquires disciplinary force because it is experienced as voluntary, necessary, or morally justified rather than externally imposed.

Second, pain functions as a mechanism of normative inscription. It translates moral, political, and cultural expectations into embodied experience by teaching subjects how to inhabit socially recognizable forms of life. Endurance, self-restraint, productivity, bodily discipline, emotional regulation, and resilience are not merely prescribed ideals but embodied dispositions cultivated through practices that involve discomfort, vulnerability, fatigue, shame, and suffering. Pain therefore renders norms experientially intelligible by inscribing them within lived embodiment.

Third, pain is fundamentally ambivalent. It simultaneously operates as a mechanism of regulation and as a potential condition for critical reflection. Pain disciplines bodies while exposing the historical contingency of the norms through which discipline operates. It neither guarantees domination nor secures emancipation; rather, it constitutes the unstable terrain upon which authority, embodiment, recognition, and agency are continuously negotiated.

Understanding pain in these terms also requires abandoning universal models of subjectivity. Pain is never distributed uniformly but through historically specific regimes of gender, race, class, sexuality, disability, and other intersecting relations of power. A genealogy of pain therefore becomes a

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genealogy of differential subjectivation, concerned not only with how subjects are formed but also with whose suffering acquires legitimacy, whose vulnerability remains invisible, and whose embodied experience becomes socially intelligible. Pain emerges, in this sense, as a gendered technology of subjectivation through which disciplinary power and embodied difference are simultaneously produced.

The Gendered Distribution of Disciplinary Pain

Understanding pain as a gendered technology of subjectivation shifts attention from pain as an individual sensation to the normative conditions governing its social distribution. Disciplinary power does not simply produce compliant subjects; it differentially organizes vulnerability by assigning unequal expectations concerning endurance, bodily regulation, emotional labour, and self-sacrifice. Pain therefore functions simultaneously as a technology of subject formation and as a mechanism through which gendered hierarchies are reproduced across institutional and cultural contexts.

This perspective reveals that disciplinary pain is inseparable from processes of moralization. Pain does more than regulate behaviour; it assigns ethical value to particular forms of embodiment. Subjects who willingly endure bodily discomfort, emotional exhaustion, or continual self-regulation become recognizable as disciplined, responsible, and productive, whereas refusal, dependency, or the public expression of suffering are often interpreted as weakness or moral failure. The moralization of pain thus legitimizes disciplinary power while obscuring the unequal conditions under which suffering is distributed.

Conceiving pain in these terms also challenges universal accounts of agency. The capacity to transform suffering into resistance is itself unequally distributed, depending upon historically situated relations of gender, race, class, disability, sexuality, and institutional recognition. Pain therefore possesses no intrinsic emancipatory potential. It becomes politically significant only when the normative frameworks governing its interpretation are themselves subjected to critical scrutiny.

This analysis reframes the relationship between discipline and gender. Gender is not merely one variable that modifies disciplinary experience but one of the principal conditions through which disciplinary pain becomes intelligible, morally valued, and socially reproduced. The production of disciplined subjects is therefore inseparable from the production of gendered subjects. A feminist genealogy of pain thus reveals that modern regimes of power govern not only bodies but also the unequal distribution of vulnerability, recognition, and legitimacy. Pain emerges as the embodied medium through which these relations are lived, normalized, and, at times, contested.

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Pain, Recognition, and Embodied Agency

Conceptualizing pain as a gendered technology of subjectivation also requires rethinking agency. Subjects emerge neither as fully autonomous individuals nor as passive effects of disciplinary power, but through historically situated practices in which authority, embodiment, and self-formation are mutually constitutive. Pain is therefore neither simply an obstacle to agency nor an inherently emancipatory force. Rather, agency itself emerges within the relations of power through which subjects are constituted.

This perspective challenges both liberal accounts that presuppose an autonomous subject existing prior to power and reductively structural accounts that leave little room for transformation. Pain neither destroys agency nor automatically generates resistance. Instead, it constitutes one of the historical conditions through which agency becomes possible, contested, and continually renegotiated.

Recognition is central to this process. Pain acquires political significance only when embodied suffering becomes socially intelligible and epistemically credible. Recognition does not merely acknowledge pre-existing experiences of pain; it shapes the conditions under which pain becomes meaningful, communicable, and capable of motivating collective action. Feminist consciousness-raising, disability activism, reproductive justice movements, and critiques of medical paternalism demonstrate how suffering can be transformed from an individualized burden into a shared form of political knowledge.

Yet recognition remains unequally distributed. Gender, race, class, disability, sexuality, and other intersecting relations of power shape whose pain is believed, whose vulnerability is acknowledged, and whose suffering remains marginalized. Agency must therefore be understood as an embodied and historically situated achievement rather than an abstract human capacity.

A feminist genealogy of pain consequently reframes subjectivation itself. Subjects are not only disciplined through pain but may also contest disciplinary norms by transforming the meanings attached to embodied suffering. Agency emerges neither outside nor beyond relations of power but through the ongoing negotiation of vulnerability, recognition, and resistance. Pain thus becomes a historically situated medium through which embodied subjects are simultaneously governed and capable of political transformation.

Toward a Feminist Philosophy of Pain

The genealogy developed in this article calls for a broader reconceptualization of pain within feminist philosophy. Rather than treating pain as a marginal concern of medical ethics, phenomenology, or the philosophy of mind, this study has argued that pain occupies a central place in the historical constitution of subjectivity. Pain is not merely an experience undergone by pre-existing individuals but a historically sedimented practice through which subjects are morally formed, disciplinarily regulated, affectively oriented, and politically recognized.

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This perspective also challenges conventional divisions between theological, modern, and contemporary philosophy. Read genealogically, Augustine, Foucault, and post-structural feminist philosophy illuminate successive historical configurations through which embodied suffering becomes productive of subjectivity. Their significance lies not in doctrinal continuity but in revealing how pain repeatedly functions as a medium through which authority, embodiment, and self-government are historically organized.

The concept of *pain as a gendered technology of subjectivation* constitutes the central theoretical contribution of this article. It explains how moral formation, disciplinary normalization, embodied normativity, and epistemic recognition are linked through historically specific regimes of power. Pain is productive not because suffering possesses intrinsic moral value, but because embodied vulnerability is repeatedly mobilized to constitute socially intelligible subjects.

A feminist philosophy of pain therefore requires more than documenting experiences of suffering or criticizing disciplinary institutions. It requires examining the normative frameworks that determine whose pain becomes meaningful, whose vulnerability is recognized, and which forms of suffering acquire moral or political legitimacy. Pain is simultaneously ethical, political, epistemic, and embodied because it mediates the relationship between power, recognition, and subject formation.

Pain should therefore be understood neither as the opposite of agency nor as an inherently emancipatory force. Rather, it is one of the historical sites through which agency is constituted, constrained, and occasionally transformed. The task of feminist philosophy is not to decide whether pain is oppressive or liberating in itself, but to analyse the conditions under which embodied suffering becomes a technology of domination, a medium of recognition, or a resource for collective political transformation.

Conclusion

This article has argued that pain should be understood not merely as a physiological sensation or an experience of suffering, but as a historically situated practice through which subjects are constituted. By bringing Augustine, Foucault, and post-structural feminist philosophy into dialogue, it has reconstructed a genealogy showing that pain repeatedly functions as a productive medium through which authority is embodied, norms are internalized, and subjects become socially intelligible. Across these different historical formations, pain emerges not as an accidental consequence of power but as one of its most enduring technologies.

The central contribution of this article is the concept of **pain as a gendered technology of subjectivation**. This concept explains how embodied suffering participates simultaneously in moral formation, disciplinary normalization, embodied normativity, and epistemic recognition. Pain is productive not because suffering possesses intrinsic ethical value, but because historically specific

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regimes of power repeatedly mobilize embodied vulnerability in the constitution of socially recognizable subjects. At the same time, this productivity is never neutral. It is differentially organized through gender, race, class, disability, sexuality, and other intersecting relations of power that shape whose suffering becomes visible, credible, and morally significant.

This perspective also reframes feminist philosophy of pain. Rather than approaching pain primarily as a problem of medical ethics, phenomenology, or individual experience, it situates suffering within the broader historical processes through which embodiment, recognition, and power become intertwined. Pain thus appears simultaneously as an ethical, political, epistemic, and embodied phenomenon whose significance depends upon the normative frameworks through which it is interpreted.

The genealogy developed here also has methodological implications. Reading Augustine, Foucault, and feminist philosophy genealogically demonstrates that theological, disciplinary, and feminist analyses of pain are best understood not as isolated traditions but as historically interconnected configurations of subject formation. Such an approach reveals both the transformations and the enduring continuities through which embodied suffering has remained central to the organization of authority and selfhood.

Finally, the concept of pain as a gendered technology of subjectivation opens new directions for feminist inquiry. Future research might examine how digital surveillance, algorithmic governance, neoliberal labour, environmental precarity, disability, queer, decolonial, and transnational perspectives reshape the production and distribution of pain under contemporary conditions. These developments suggest that pain will remain one of the most significant sites through which feminist philosophy continues to rethink the relations among embodiment, power, recognition, and political agency.

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