

Foucault's Dandy: Constructive Selfhood in the Last Writings of Michel Foucault

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ABSTRACT

This essay provides an interpretation of the concept of “self” and subjectivity in the later writings of French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984). The problem recognized by Foucault in his last writings was the place of the self in post-structuralist theory, which tends to deny the significance of agency, and thus the possibility of ethics. I will show how and why Foucault turned away from his earlier neo-romantic and counter-discursive theory of resistance towards a fuller but inadequately elaborated “aesthetics of existence.” Through a revisionist analysis of classical and Christian “technologies of the self,” Foucault developed a new understanding of subjectivity as well as a revived “asceticism”—one that endorses agency as part of an ethics of self-creation, and has much in common with both Stoic and Zen Buddhist understandings of “constructive selfhood.” For the late Foucault: “The responsibility to create meanings and values anew is a perpetual task but nevertheless the foundation of all human endeavour.”

One thing is needed. —‘To give style’ to one’s character—a great and rare art! He exercises it who surveys all that his nature presents in strength and weakness and then moulds it to an artistic plan...

— Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1882)

In our day, and once again Nietzsche indicated the turning-point from a long way off, it is not so much the absence or death of God that is affirmed as the end of Man...

— Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (1970)

We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of [the] kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries.

— Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power” (1982)

Are we not straying as though through an infinite nothing?

– Friedrich Nietzsche

Although Nietzsche’s proclamation, over a century ago, of the “death of God” has often been misinterpreted and misunderstood, it remains a powerful testament to the anxiety experienced by many modern Westerners (or at least modern Western philosophers), and resonates as a foundation for twentieth-century philosophical thought. Nietzsche hoped that, with the Eternal Tormentor finally defeated, the human subject would “be able to attain to the philosophical conviction of the unconditional necessity of all actions and their complete unaccountability and to make it part of his flesh and blood, [whereupon the] remainder of the pang of conscience [would] disappear” (132-35). Yet even Nietzsche realized that this would be no easy ride to freedom. It is often forgotten that it is a “madman” who proclaims the death of God, and in Nietzsche’s short parable the proclaimer is as awestruck as much by the terrors as he is the freedoms opened up by the act of collective deicide.

For Nietzsche, self-deification becomes the only solution, manifest in the mythical figure of the *Übermensch*. At once condemning the self-presumption of Christianity and denouncing the sickly European as a “ludicrous herd animal,” Nietzsche presents a new humanism (which some might call an anti-humanism), based on the “will to power,” and a newer, stronger nihilism in order to counteract the “imperfect nihilism” (i.e., *decadence*) made popular by Schopenhauer and his ilk. Yet the legacy of the unreserved “yea-saying” involved

in the *overcoming* of “man”¹ reveals some uncertainty with regard to the prospects for a refashioned subjectivity. Although Jean-Paul Sartre denied that the existentialists (those, at least, of the Sartrean type) propound an “aesthetic morality,” he makes a clear connection between moral choice and the construction of a work of art, and refers to Heidegger as a proponent of the triumph over death by the invocation of “purposes” and “projects” that will themselves confer meaning upon an otherwise meaningless subject and objects. (Sartre 14) The difficulty, upon the death of God, lies in this awfully polarized choice between idealistic self-deification and fatalistic nihilism. “How shall we, the murderers of all murderers, console ourselves?” (Nietzsche 203)

Subjectless: The Structural Allegory

The philosopher’s task is not to eulogize the human, it is to “dissolve” it, to destroy its pretensions, to restore it to nature as an object among objects.

— Claude Lévi-Strauss

Beyond Sartre and existentialism, perhaps the most significant philosophical attempt to come to terms with the Nietzschean legacy is structuralism.² Historically, structuralism arose in opposition to both positivism and humanism, which, according to structuralists, naively postulate either the existence of a reality independent of human apprehension or an equally preposterous self-created world. Lévi-Strauss’s achievement was to isolate a symbolic order of reality, one that exists independently of both the things that are symbolized and the people who symbolize.³ Thus, the world only has “objective” existence in the systemic orders that represent it. In what has been called “Kantianism without a transcendental subject” (Clarke 38), Lévi-Strauss relocates the source of reason in the individual, but in a purely formal unconscious rather than a consciousness that is prey to vanity and selfishness. As the “universal and natural” characteristic defining our humanity, the formal unconscious provides the ultimate meaning of human existence, as well as the means to criticize society in the name of our inherent humanity.

Despite this attempt, the central implication of the so-called Structural Allegory is the denial of the strategic centrality of the speaker-subject, the hitherto embellished transcendental self. Lévi-Strauss set structuralism’s philosophical anthropology (or lack of such) when he proclaimed the redundancy of the human subject, arguing “the

aesthetic truths of immediate experience are simply mystical, vague, and misleading sensations that have no obvious status” (Clarke 23). The Structural Allegory introduces between words and things a structural relation, dissolving meanings into “prior regularities and processes of signification” (Fekete xiii). It is a decentralizing and demythologizing principle, challenging (like Durkheim) all attempts to explain human activity along the lines of individual psychogenesis. Against more overtly political movements such as the Frankfurt School, structuralism does not deign to liberate particular objects from subordination to the tyranny of the transcendental signified, but to “liberate the free play of signifiers from the transcendental signified in the sense of concept, stable meaning, the ‘presence’ of thought to itself” (xv). Thus, all meanings, however provisional, are held suspect, and the demythological project, using language as the structural model for all human activity, comes to address *all* articulated activity as inscribed within a discourse of power and domination. *Post*-structuralism, in particular, has been accused of this seemingly nihilistic tendency: committed to seeing all increases in the measure of coherence, satisfaction, and attempts towards plenitude in a negative light, *post*-structuralism, it has been argued—most strongly by Anglo-American theorists but most convincingly by Jürgen Habermas—cannot adequately conceptualize either *communication* or *community*. We are left with what seems to be a vengeful and debunking methodology, one that rejects not only the human agent but also the collectivity, refusing any and all forms of substantive praxis, rejecting real meaning, and proclaiming the demonic triumph of will-for-the-sake-of-itself.

Though this critique may be overblown, here lies the problem as well as the challenge. Can such a program be articulated with principles of appropriateness that are context-sensitive and decentralized? After the necessary and important critical sandblasting of the Structural Allegory, is there any opportunity to accept their victories while re-conceptualizing a new subjectivity? Perhaps, as John Fekete argues, going *beyond* the Structural Allegory does not mean denying its relevance but rather reading it in a new way. (xx) This, I shall argue, was precisely the task of the later writings of Michel Foucault.

Selfless: The Order of Things

The researches of psychoanalysis, of linguistics, of anthropology have “decentered” the subject in relation to laws of its own desire, the forms of its language, the rules of its actions, or the play of its mythical and imaginative discourse.

— Michel Foucault

Although Foucault made a habit of denying adherence to structuralism (or to any school or movement, for that matter), there is little doubt that he was affected and greatly influenced by the hegemonic discourse of his academic maturation. He speaks, in *Discipline and Punish*, of the end of “heroization” and the beginnings of objectification and subjection: “the appearance of a new modality of power in which each individual receives as his status his own individuality and in which he is linked by his status to... the ‘marks’ that characterize him and make him a case” (99). The “defined self” is nothing more than a creation of the discourse of prevailing structures of power and domination. The emergence of the modern self-as-subject figures prominently not only in the “subjection” of humankind but also in all struggles to

combat this subjection, in all efforts to reclaim that lost humanity.

Ten years previous, in *The Order of Things*, Foucault attacked the Kantian-inspired anthropocentric will-to-truth and its centralization of the cognitive subject. This work ends with a prophecy akin to that of Nietzsche’s, in which not only does the subject disappear, but even the whole concept of “Man” becomes meaningless and redundant. From this time self-conscious discourse will be about *discourse alone*, and no longer about “Man” or the subject. The “end of Man,” though in some respects a “narrow, imperceptible displacement” is in profound correlation with the death of God, says Foucault, and Nietzsche’s thought heralds the end of the murderer in his deed, as the last man situates “his language, his thought, his laughter in the space of that already dead God, yet [at the same time] positing himself as he who has killed God and whose existence includes the freedom and decision of that murder” (DeGeorge 283). The death of God also means the birth of literature—but a necessarily transgressive, non-discursive literature, one that “sets fire” to discourse and persists in pushing the limit of discourse into the realm of the other. In the transgressive language of eroticism, which Foucault saw in his Bataille-inspired early writings as the language of the future, humanity overcomes the limits of the death of God. “In a world which no longer recognizes any positive meaning in the sacred... transgression supplies the sole manner of discovering the sacred in its immediate substance” (“Preface” 79). “Man” the deicide, faced with his deed, also must face the end of the gap in which he was able to speak, think, and exist; he must answer for his own finitude. According to Foucault, this heralds “the scattering of the profound stream of time by which [Man] felt himself carried along and whose pressure he suspected in the very being of things” (DeGeorge 283).

Technologies of the Self: The History of Sexuality

I think that a new pole has been constituted for the activity of philosophizing, and this pole is characterized by the question, “What are we today?”

— Michel Foucault

At his premature death of AIDS in 1984, Foucault left behind a legacy of seminal texts as well as the unfulfilled promise of future investigations. The question of where Foucault was heading intellectually is not mere idle curiosity but reflects a renewed interest in the apparent shift in his last works. This move can be dated to about the turn of the decade, though the seeds were certainly sown in the late 1970s, when Foucault delayed the publication of the second and third volumes of his *History of Sexuality* in order to study more closely the “technologies of the self” in Greco-Roman and early Christian times. Generally, these two works reflect a new interest in the self, not the purely passive non-self of his early writings, but a self that is at once created and creative; a “subject” with at least some power of autonomy within a world of power structures—yet one who need not resort to excess and counter-discursive practices.

Before proceeding to examine this shift in itself, the question of continuity (or lack of such) within the body of Foucault’s work must be addressed. Is this turn to a more intensive study of selfhood and subjectivity a direct break from the earlier writings, a repudiation of the vision in which power and domination within discursive structures of meaning leaves little room for human autonomy (or agency)? Foucault addressed this question in some of his last interviews, and though he confesses that consistency is not of the highest

priority for him (a position held much easier, it seems, by poets⁴ than by speculative thinkers), he explains his apparent conversion as a “theoretical shift” (“Technologies” 5). Foucault saw his own work in terms of continuity, albeit one that would periodically swing upon certain axes, which would vary in relative importance depending upon the particular issue under analysis. In *Madness and Civilization*, the first axis involves “the formation of a domain of recognitions” (*connaissances*) which constitute themselves as specific knowledge of “mental illness”; the second, “the organization of a normative system (built on a complex apparatus) whose purpose was to isolate and take custody of the insane”; and the third, “the definition of a relation to oneself and to others as possible subjects of madness” (“Technologies” 4). If the first axis, as Foucault says, dominates this first study, it is the second, “the relation to rules,” that becomes the central focus of *Discipline and Punish*. “Instead of seeking the explanation in a general conception of the law, or in the evolving modes of industrial production, it seemed far wiser to look at the workings of Power... the refinement... elaboration, and instillation... of techniques for governing individuals” (6). Finally, the *History of Sexuality* project, says Foucault, can be explained in terms of the third axis: the modality of *relation to the self*. While the other two remain important, they are necessarily overshadowed by the third, as the study of sexuality requires a more particular look at the human body and concepts of selfhood.

From this explanation, Foucault seems to imply that his shift to a focus on the self was a purely formal move necessitated only by a change in topics of study, when in fact he claims elsewhere that, from *The Use of Pleasure* on, he was far more interested in issues of self than in matters of sex. “I felt obliged,” he relates, “to study the games of truth in the relationships of self with self and the forming of oneself as a subject,” using sexuality, or “the history of desiring man,” as a relevant field of investigation for this task. (“Technologies” 5) Also, despite the appearance in the “third axis” thesis of a planned and systematic intellectual development, Foucault admits that, in his later work, he “reflected that, after all, it was best to sacrifice a definite program to a promising line of approach” (“Politics” 7). More likely, as both Charles Taylor (1986) and Lois McNay (1992) have suggested, Foucault found himself, in the late 1970s, up against a wall created by his own work. For Taylor, this barrier belies a fundamental limit of “neo-Nietzscheanism,” where power without a subject coupled with an approach of monolithic relativism all such arguments to absurdity. “[I]n his major works, like *The Order of Things* and *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault sounds as though he believed that as an historian, he could stand nowhere, identifying with none of the *epistemai* or structures of power whose coming and going he impartially surveys” (Taylor 98).

This is the point at which we see the *Kehre* in Foucault’s work. He may have come to realize the ultimate futility of his early approach, as important as it was from a critical perspective. “Perhaps Foucault was moving,” allows Taylor, “before his sudden and premature death, to free his position from the paradox... linked with the impossible attempt to stand nowhere” (99)—and, one might add, still *do* something. Lois McNay, in *Foucault and Feminism*, sees Foucault entering the 1980s enmeshed in this problem, which would eventually draw him into “the circle of the philosophical discourse of modernity which he thought he could explode” (99).

In a more positive light, this new line of enquiry allows Foucault to examine, for the first time, the way individuals, by their own means or with the help of others, act on their own body, soul, thoughts, conduct, and ways of being. A new vision of the self is produced, one that stands between the no-self of the post-structuralist early Foucault and the essentialized self of much of post-Kantian philosophical discourse. This tactic, as we have seen, indicates a turn from a picture of the self objectified through scientific enquiry (*The Order of Things*) and through “dividing practices” (*Madness and Civilization*, *Birth of the Clinic*, *Discipline and Punish*), and permits Foucault to explain “how individuals may escape the homogenizing tendencies of power in modern society through the assertion of their autonomy” (McNay 3). At the same time, Foucault does not essentialize human autonomy as the realization of some sort of inner, meaningful humanity or human nature, because these practices of self are ultimately determined within a social context. The question of continuity lies in this new Foucaultian “self,” which, though not an outright repudiation of his earlier proclamation of the “end of Man,” is certainly a revised and more flexible conception of subjectivity, and one that contains new possibilities for agency and ethics.

In six lectures delivered at the University of Vermont in 1982, Foucault schematized four possible “technologies,” each a matrix of practical reason. The first two, technologies of *production* and technologies of *signification* need not concern us here, but technologies of *power*, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends of domination (i.e., “objectivization”), and technologies of the *self*, which permit individuals to effect by their own means self-transformation “in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality,” are those upon which Foucault concentrated in his final works. In particular, technologies of the self suggests an alternative to the dogmatic conception of selfhood presupposed and perpetuated by modern humanism, which, according to Foucault, “presents a certain form of our ethics as a universal model for any kind of freedom” (“Truth” 15). Rather than a normative, self-evident⁵ or universal idea of “Man,” there are “more secrets, more possible freedoms, and more inventions in our future than we can imagine in humanism as it is...[presently] represented on every side of the political rainbow” (“Truth” 15). Thus, technologies of the self imply not just concepts created by discursive power and meaning but also the gaps in these structures of domination in and by which we fabricate ourselves. Moreover, these gaps appear not only in contemporary discourses of power but are also evident within the traditions that lie at the foundation of Western civilization, in particularly those of the classical and Christian worlds.

The Classical Self: Knowing and Caring

If you take a whole series of texts going from the first Platonic dialogue up to the major texts of the later Stoics you would see that the theme of care for the self has truly permeated all ethical thought.

– Michel Foucault

Any study of classical Greek culture necessitates at least a cursory response to the Delphic oracular maxim: “know thyself.” Foucault argues that we moderns have mistakenly interpreted these words as an abstraction concerning life, when in fact they are words of “technical advice,” the fruit of our ignorance being a confusion of *gnothi sauton* with another

Greek maxim, *epimelesthoi sauton*: “to take care of oneself” (“Technologies” 19). Over time, he argues, the status of the latter was usurped by the former—despite the fact that it was the very need to “take care of oneself” that originally brought the oracular maxim into operation.

This relation between *self-knowledge* and *self-care* is fundamental to the development of respective technologies of the self. Appearing as early as the Platonic dialogue *Alciabades*, concern for self is more than just an attitude of paying attention, or of self-absorption, but is rather a “real activity” that involves “taking pains with one’s holdings and health,” as well as one’s “soul” (“Technologies” 24). According to Socrates, the effort of the soul to take care of itself is the principle on which political action can be founded, and the young Alciabades will be a good politician insofar as he contemplates his soul in the divine element. Thus, knowing oneself becomes the object of the quest of concern for self. “Care for self is of course knowledge of self in Socrates/Plato but is also the knowledge of a certain number of rules of conduct/principles... to care for oneself is to fit one’s self out with these truths” (“Ethic of Care” 5). As such, Foucault links ethics to the prevailing game(s) of truth. Care of self is not, however, narcissistic, the Greek *ethos* of freedom is also a way of caring for others. Self-care renders one competent to involve oneself within community relationships, and implies a relationship to the other to the extent that, “in order to really care for self, one must listen to the teachings of a master” (6). To be sure, care for others is not primary in the classical formulation, as it will come to be, at least ideally, in Christian times, but rather is complementary with and indivisible from care of self. To invoke language from a different tradition to be discussed below, the two are non-differentiated and dependently co-arising.

In Hellenistic times, concern for the self becomes even more important, particularly in the teachings of Epicurus and the Stoics. During this period writing comes to be associated with self-concern,⁶ and as introspection becomes more detailed, Foucault argues, the new *concern* with the self manifests in a new *experience* of self. Moreover, to be concerned with the self in Hellenistic and Roman periods becomes more than just a preparation for political activity: care of self emerges as a *universal* principle, and one that may in fact involve a renunciation of the political sphere. Finally, according to Foucault, care becomes an ethic for all, not just the young, applying to everyone throughout their lives.⁷

The classical centrality of self-care, however, did not last, and “at a certain moment in time—... it is difficult to say when it happened—the care for the self [became] somewhat suspect” (“Ethic of Care” 4). Though it would be a mistake to attribute it wholly to Christianity, this change took place in the early Christian era, when care of self was frequently being denounced as a variation on the sin of pride, or a at very least a form of egoism or self-interest that was in contradiction to the ideals of *agápe* or *caritas*—the care of others and the corresponding ethic of self-sacrifice. The Greco-Roman ethic of self-care, as a way to self-knowledge and self-improvement, ultimately became displaced by the virtues of altruism, heroic sacrifice and self-renunciation.

In short, the principal reasons why *gnothi sauton* eventually obscured *epimelesthoi sauton* are: first, a transformation in Western moral principles, whereby self-care viewed as self-love came to clash with a more rigorous morality and principles of austerity; second, in post-Cartesian philosophy (and eventually modern psychology), knowledge of the self (as a thinking subject) takes on an *a priori* position

in the quest for a theory of knowledge. The subtle inversion in hierarchy precipitated by these factors contributes, Foucault concludes, to very different concepts of selfhood and self-fashioning in ancient and modern eras. As with Nietzsche before him, it is not difficult to see on which side Foucault’s sympathies lie.

Askesis and Ethics

Foucault cites Max Weber in his Vermont lectures, suggesting a contrast between Weber’s question: To what kind of asceticism should one submit? and his own query: “How have certain kinds of interdictions required the price of certain kinds of knowledge about oneself?” or in other words, “What must one know about oneself in order to be willing to renounce everything?” (“Technologies” 17) With these questions in mind, Foucault delved into an investigation of the hermeneutics and technologies of the self in pagan and early Christian practice. For Foucault, an “ascetical practice” is an exercise by which one tries to transform one’s self in order to obtain a certain mode of being. Thus, the self-care ethos of Greco-Roman times, as an ascetical practice, was the manner in which individual (and civic) liberty considered itself ethical.

Again, all of this points to a close connection between ideas of the self and ethical praxis. *Askesis*, the testing of one’s preparation, asks: “Is the truth assimilated enough to become ethics so that we can behave as we must when an event presents itself?” (“Technologies” 36). Ethics, as understood by Foucault in his later work, is best understood as “the elaboration of a form of relation to self that enables an individual to fashion himself into a subject of ethical conduct” (Bernauer 54). Here we see a convergence between the Greek concept of *askesis*, or ascetic practice, the *ethos* of care of self, and the priority of ethical conduct as an indistinguishable part of this self-formation. Schematically, we have a conflation of three important but usually distinct Greek concepts: *askesis*, *aesthetikos*, and *ethos*.

Stoics, Christians and Californians

This Holy Trinity of Selfhood can be found in the Stoic tradition that emerged out of a decaying Roman empire, in which the classical speculations of Plato and Aristotle came to be replaced by more intrinsically ethical concerns, typified by the reflexive query: What must I do? Stoic ethics represent a response to the new exigencies of existence in a changing world. Rather than a fixed system of thought, Stoicism is best considered a particular set of “strategies for existence” that taken together highlight the disastrous effects of the passions and the sensuous world upon self-knowledge, and enjoin a taming of human passions by self-examination in order to establish a harmonious relationship with the order of things.⁸

Foucault lists three Stoic techniques of self: letters (self-disclosure); review of actions (self-examination); and *askesis*—conceived here as the remembering of correct principles and modes of action. For Seneca, the imperative is not on the discovery of some hidden truth but rather on the *remembrance* of a truth now forgotten. “The subject constitutes the intersection between acts which have to be regulated and rules for what ought to be done” (“Technologies” 34). *Askesis* comes to be the progressive consideration of self, and it is to be obtained through the acquisition and assimilation of truth. “[Stoicism] has as its final aim not preparation for another reality but access to the reality of this world. It is a set of practices by which one can acquire, assimilate, and transform truth into permanent principles of action” (35).

The Stoic technique(s) of self differ from later Christian hermeneutics of self, in which a set of conditions and rules of behavior are imposed, not for the purpose of a good life in this world, but in order to lead the individual from one reality to another, i.e., to salvation in another world. Also, Christian emphases on the act of confession, the importance of faith, and the notion of penance (by which one attempts to break away for the self, to refuse the self in the face of God), cannot be reconciled with Stoic principles as outlined above. For one, the Stoic (“mnemotechnical”) process of self-examination involves a memorization and retrieval of certain rules of conduct, while the Christian ethic of penitence “superimposes truth about self by violent rupture and dissociation” (“Technologies” 43). Also, the Christian priority of obedience as it grew out of the cenobitic ideal, involving a sacrifice of self and will to a master, revokes Stoicism’s *askesis*, as does the prioritization of contemplation over action. Yet, as Foucault makes clear, neither does Stoicism share that modern romantic-secular concern for self which the author dubs (with undisguised derision) the “Californian cult of the self,” in which there exists some sort of true or real self, which one need only unearth to achieve plenitude. (“Subject and Power” 362). According to this rather naive conception of selfhood—William Blake by way of Aldous Huxley and Jim Morrison—in the cleansing the doors of our inward perception, whether through psychological or therapeutic practices (or psychedelic drugs), one’s hidden self manifests itself as “infinite and holy.” This type of understanding, which claims many adherents as a form of novel self-knowledge is in fact, according to Foucault, in a direct line with historical Western procedures for producing the truth about sex and, by way of such, the self. Like the *scientia sexualis*⁹ that emerged in the nineteenth century, the Californian cult demands that sex always “speak the truth... and... that it tell us our truth... the deeply buried truth of that truth about ourselves which we think we possess in our immediate consciousness” (*HOS I* 69). Through the techniques of analysis and therapy, the (“escaped”) truth of the subject is elucidated or rediscovered. Thus, the feigned art of the Californian cult is really another form of the “science” of self-awareness—the former taking on an aspect of rebellion and a veneer of creativity, the latter a more (for Foucault) sinister implication of determinism and the ostensible exposition of “reality.” This contrasts with Foucault’s emphasis on the positive aspects of the Stoical techniques of self, which do not aim to discover a lost self but look to constitute a new self based on certain rules of practice.

Prospects: Aesthetics of Existence

We don’t have to choose between our world and the Greek world. But since we can see very well that some of the main principles of our ethics have been related at a certain moment to an aesthetics of existence, I think that this kind of historical analysis can be useful.

– Michel Foucault

Long before Nietzsche, the modern West had relied on a concept of “Man” whose very finitude allows him to take the place of God. This “startling idea” (Rabinow and Dreyfus 32) breaks forth a vengeance in Kant with his constitution of the subject as “an empirico-transcendental doublet” (Foucault *Order* 32). As we have seen, Foucault in his work rebels against this type of essentialism, calling the revelation of the “secret” of non-essentiality the “deepest truth that the genealogist has to reveal.”¹⁰ According to Karlis Racevskis, the question of the subject became central for Foucault when

he discovered that the constitution of self as subject before Christianity was relatively unproblematic. Although there was a mode of subjection, “it was something that did not operate so much according to moral norms as it depended on *an aesthetic choice*” (29, my emphasis). The Greek and Stoic episodes, by exposing a highly personalized and pre-normalized ethic of the self, make a valuable contribution to current perceptions of subjectivity.

One thing is certain, however, Foucault does not advocate a return to the Greek or Stoic techniques of the self through self-care. Even if such were desirable, it is simply not possible to transcend the vast cultural and societal differences between post-modernity and these earlier times. Rather, acting as a self-proclaimed “genealogist,” Foucault unveils some of the assumptions upon which selfhood has been grounded, and shows that the modern self is, like these earlier selves a construct of particular “games of truth”—although also like these earlier examples, one that allows for creative possibilities within the gaps of the truth games. “[S]aying that philosophy has strayed and must return to certain forgotten principles,” he declaims in a thinly-veiled criticism of Heidegger, is simply “not interesting.” However, “contact with other ideas and philosophers can produce something, but something new, fit with content” (“Ethic of Care” 14). *The* question of the Western world, says Foucault, is why are we concerned with truth, even more so than with the self? There has been little to suggest that we can define a strategy of truth external to the situations in which we find ourselves. This is not to deny that a truth of some sort exists, but to place the obligation to truth under critical enquiry along with the rest of our assumptions, no matter how commonsensical.

Thus, while rejecting a return to a mythical Golden Age of the Self as pure folly, the examples of past practices and techniques of self bring to light some possibilities for new forms of subjectivity, drawing upon earlier models but remaining contextualized within our own historical and cultural setting (the latter of which is, increasingly, and for better or worse, becoming globalized). The self, as *form*, not substance, is more aptly understood as a collection of selves brought together to conceptualize a human identity, and created with recourse to ethical practices and self-care techniques. The problem, in Foucault’s eyes, is not so much power as a monolithic agent of evil, but the arbitrary use of such. Ultimately, one must know how to avoid in these practices of power the effects of domination. One way in which this problem might be posed (if not necessarily solved) is in terms of the connection of *ethos* and *aesthetikos* in the creation of self and the practices of freedom.

Critique: The Limits of Aestheticism

To such a tremulous wisp constantly re-forming itself on the stream... what is real in our lives fines itself down. It is with this movement... that analysis leaves off—that continual vanishing away, that strange, perpetual, weaving and unweaving of ourselves.

– Walter Pater

It may be pertinent at this point to discuss, briefly, the use of aesthetics in Foucault and as a conceptual category within modern social and political philosophy. The term “aesthetics,” coined in the eighteenth century by Baumgarten, was picked up by Kant who provided, for the first time since Plato, an account of aesthetics within a larger philosophy of human existence. Friedrich Schiller “anthropologized” Kantian aesthetics into an epistemological (and pedagogical) category,

and sought via *The Aesthetic Education of Man* a “revolutionized subjectivity” that would lead in turn to a refashioning of culture and society. Thus, the idea of art and creative activity as revolutionary forces (however internalized, to begin with) became central to both European Romanticism as a cultural movement and German Idealism as a philosophical one.

In an essay entitled “Postmodernity and Desire,” Scott Lash distinguishes these earlier traditions from two more recent ones: “aesthetic modernism” and post-modernity. The former “constitutes a break with representations, hence a certain self-referentiality and above all a set of formalisms” (Lash 3), and first emerged in the so-called aesthetic movements of late-nineteenth century France and especially England, where, under the leadership of Walter Pater and his pupil Oscar Wilde, aesthetics breaks away from socio-political responsibility. Post-modernity, says Lash, breaks in turn with the formalisms of aesthetic modernity, towards “a new primacy of the unconscious, of the bodily and material, of desires and libidinal impulse,” and is best exemplified in the writings of the “neo-Nietzscheans” such as Artaud, Bataille, Klossowski, Lyotard, Deleuze, and (early) Foucault. While eschewing the hyper-theoreticism of German Idealism, this strain of postmodern theory “classifies this new aesthetic substance and indicates its ethical and political implications.” For the early Foucault, aesthetics works within the gap or the fold—the “third world” established in possibility by Kant’s aesthetics and in practice by the work of Sade: the *pli* of postmodern counter-discursivity (4). Thus, insofar as Foucault’s aesthetic breaks with formalism and has its basis in the unconscious, it is a postmodern aesthetic. For Foucault, theory, transgressing the realm of discourse (particularly through non-discursive literature) mobilizes a critique “—of discourse, of forms of subjectivity—that is preeminently practical and political” (6).

However, in Foucault’s last writings he turns away from Bataille and a theory of desire toward an “aesthetic of existence” which evokes, in a number of ways, both the disinterested dandy of aestheticism and Schiller’s revolution of subjectivity. The difference, as we shall see, is the non-essentialism that lies at the heart of the Foucaultian aesthetics, where the simulacrum of self creates itself with recourse neither to a set of rules nor to a presupposed transcendental identity. By the term “arts of existence” Foucault means “those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only seek to transform themselves in their singular being, and to make their lives into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria” (“Ethic of Care” 10-11). In the study of the sexualities of antiquity, Foucault realized a certain resemblance between these times and our own, where the certainty of a code of moral rules has disappeared and “to this absence of morality corresponds, *must* correspond, the search for an aesthetics of existence” (*Politics* 49).

Foucault’s Dandy

Of the vaporization and centralization of the Ego. Everything depends on that.

– Charles Baudelaire

Modern man is not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself.

– Michel Foucault

“The service of philosophy,” intoned Walter Pater just over a century ago, “is to rouse, to startle the human spirit to a life of constant and eager observation” (152). In this respect, Foucault is a true Paterian, for as Charles Taylor has affirmed in his essay “Foucault on Freedom and Truth,” Foucault “disconcerts” (69). Nowhere, perhaps, has he disconcerted so much and so many as in his concept of aesthetics of self, which has been vilified by various critics as, essentially, the promulgation of an elitist and amoral subjectivism, without relevance to the realities of human life. There appear to be two prominent foci of this attack, the first being a criticism of aestheticism (Lash’s “aesthetic modernism”) more generally, specifically the nihilistic implications of such; the second dealing with an apparent hyper-subjectivism within the concept of aesthetic self-formulation (as in Schillerian Romanticism/Idealism).

The first part of this critique relates to the connection of Foucault’s aesthetic techniques of self with what appears to be a similar concept, the “dandy” lionized by French poet, critic and *maudit* Charles Baudelaire (and later martyred in the person of Oscar Wilde). Baudelaire emphasized the epiphanic creation of self through style and appearance. Speaking, in what seems to be a deliberately paradoxical fashion, of a simultaneous “vaporization” and “centralization” of the ego, Baudelaire suggests that recognition of meaninglessness is a necessary precondition to the development of stylized form. His poetry, as a product of the supreme Imagination, becomes “an idealizing faculty that uses a stimulus in the real world to give it flight” (Baudelaire 134). As such, poetic and self-creation coincide in the Baudelairean dialectic of *Spleen* and *Idéal*. The Poet-Alchemist creates himself with his poetry and his style, cemented by the tension between despair and hope, “angry restlessness” and “fertile creative energy.”¹¹

Of interest to Foucault is less Baudelaire as a poet than as archetypal dandy—one who makes of “his body, his behaviour, his feelings and his passions, his very existence, a work of art” (McNay 88). Baudelaire epitomizes, in some sense, the modern imperative of an ascetic reinvention of the self — “to take oneself as an object of complex and difficult elaboration.” Somewhat surprisingly, Charles Taylor makes a connection between Baudelaire’s dandy and the Stoic hero, who share an ethic of self-elaboration through rules and practices, not as imposed moral imperatives but rather as self-styled principles of thought and action. Echoing not only Pater and Wilde but also the young Marx—a coupling which itself speaks volumes about the tensions in Foucault’s work—Foucault laments the specialization of art in modern society. “What strikes me,” he relates, “is the fact that in our society art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life, that art is something which is specialized or which is done by experts who are artists” (“Nietzsche” 350). Concluding, in a fashion reminiscent not only of Nietzsche and Heidegger but also of Herbert Marcuse, Ernst Bloch and Walt Whitman, he asks: “But couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art?”

Here Foucault seems to have reached the pinnacle of subjectivist aestheticism. But has he? Richard Rorty warns that such a program, if applied on a mass scale, would have disastrous socio-political consequences. (McNay 159). Jürgen Habermas, as well, laments the undermining of theoretical and practical reason that coincides with aesthetic modernism (Lash 1). Yet even the arch-dandy Baudelaire maintained the virtue of “moral progress”—the only possible progress from which an ethics can evolve (Baudelaire xxxvii). The later Foucault, as we have seen in his discussion of Stoicism, does not neglect

the ethical component, and would not likely have joined other “decadents” in propounding a “style for style’s sake.” Richard Wolin allows that aesthetics have an important critical and utopian function,¹² while adding the coda that aesthetics *must* interpenetrate with other realms, specifically the ethical, in order to avoid the dangers of elitism and amorality (Wolin 77).

Perhaps the most positive appraisal of Foucault’s aestheticism comes from John Rajchman, who sees Foucaultian ethics furthering a modern ethical tradition that centralizes the question of agency and praxis, while denying, in postmodern fashion, the essentialism of selfhood. “A modern practical philosophy,” says Rajchman, “is the philosophy for a practice in which what one is capable of being is not rooted in prior knowledge of what one is” (Rajchman 172). This anti-essentialist aspect proves vital for a feminist reading of late Foucault, according to Lois McNay, who plays down the dandyist element, arguing that he is following in the intellectual footsteps of Nietzsche, Simmel, and Adorno (and perhaps Charles Taylor), all of whom emphasize a constructionist affirmation of self through aesthetic expressivism. In this light, the more pressing problem with the Foucaultian self is not so much his “aestheticism” as, ironically, the spectre of “intense subjectivism” (McNay 161) reminiscent of transcendental Idealism. Taylor, similarly, suggests that “subject-centredness (selfishness) is a much more insidious thing than the thematic penchant for self-expression” (Taylor 429). For McNay, the danger is rooted in Foucault’s emphasis on “the idea of an isolated process of self-stylization as the basis for a modern ethics of existence” (164). Essentially, McNay critiques what she sees as the valorization of the individual realm over the social, arguing that the latter is not invariably antipathetic to the former and that the social realm should be seen rather in its capacities for protection as well as in its threatening light.

Selfless Selfhood: Foucault and Zen?

I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face.

– Michel Foucault

While admitting that both criticisms leveled against Foucault’s later work have undeniable weight, it seems that these, and particularly the second, express a rather narrow (and one might add particularly Occidental) conception of selfhood, which tends to conflate selfhood with individualism, and individualism with selfishness. Perhaps Foucault’s self-out-of-nothing may be better explained in terms of a non-Western conception of identity, in particular the Japanese Zen Buddhist model.¹³ Foucault’s self is ultimately neither Kantian nor Christian, but rather *formal* and *pragmatic*, his “ethics of the self” is not based upon an adherence to external (or internal) moral obligations, but rather upon “who we are said to be, and what, therefore, it is possible for us to become” (McNay 90). Creativity and self-creativity are central, as is the Stoic ethical *askesis*. Just as, for McNay, there is no necessary antipathy between self and other, so there may be no necessary correlation between self and selfishness, nor is the possibility of ethical action necessarily dependent upon ontological transcendence of the Kantian or Christian sort.

As we have seen, the Foucaultian self is non-essentialist—an amalgam, as it were, of possibilities. Similarly, within Buddhist tradition and Chan/Zen more specifically, the self may be best considered “a storehouse of creative possibilities.”¹⁴ According to at least one

understanding of Zen, humanity’s “fallen” condition, its ignorance and its finitude, do not stem from an intellectual error to be rectified by the knowledge of certain deeper truths, but from an “error” in being itself. To overcome this “error” one must overcome one’s self as is usually understood, awakening to a new provisional or pragmatic “self”—rooted in a deep awareness and experience (i.e., “realization” in both senses) of its own ultimate “emptiness.” Put otherwise, this new “self” is nothing less than the principle of awakening (Jp. *satori*) in every human being, the so-called “Buddha-nature” that frees a person from the limitations of the fictive subjectivity that we commonly take for granted as being essential, stable, and even immortal.

According to classical Buddhist teachings, the historical Buddha Shakyamuni expressly refused to say anything at all about the self. The “I” (the transcendental self) is an illusion, albeit a powerful one that arose because “the power of [human] thought enables us to construct symbols of things apart from the things themselves... [and] because the symbol [of our “selves”] is so much more stable than the fact, we learn to identify ourselves with our idea of ourselves.” In Zen, as in most versions of post-structuralism, the habitual “I” can be found to contain no abiding entity, *yet it exists*, and “to refuse to give it, as a provisional and changing thing, a provisional and temporary meaning, is a purism which does not help” (Humphries 40-41).

Even the apparent meaninglessness of life can be full of wonders, says Zen, as the awakening to existence makes us see that necessity is freedom and freedom is necessity in the eternally active and ever-freshening self. In theory, at least,¹⁶ true “self”-ness does not imply selfishness but just the opposite, as the creative “self” involves the other and the world. Moreover, in a fashion reminiscent of Stoicism, Zen teaches that there is only one way to be moral and that is to transcend the dualism of rules and no rules and to do the right thing at the right time in the right way, and this calls for an act of creation in the living context. “Humankind’s point of departure for self-understanding,” Foucault contends, “begins today... [e]ach day we make ourselves anew in fresh formulations” (Hutton 134). Yet ethical life “is neither something that can be antecedently specified nor... extemporized out of sheer spontaneity” (Suzuki xxix). Zen commands action, and one’s tasks *are* one’s life; one must live in the now, not in an abstract future or in a hypothetical beginning of historical time. Only in the uncreative life is the doer separated from what she does, and it is her divorce from life that makes her look to the past and future and lament what is not. As with Baudelaire’s dandy, the Zen adept makes a creative art of life itself, and just as the artist does not value the final product above the process which created it, the Zen “self” gives herself wholeheartedly to all its moments and perceives no radical difference between ends and means, or “self” and “other.”¹⁵

Thus, while Foucault’s espousal of self-out-of-nothing seems to be a dangerous tip of the hat to neo-Nietzschean subjectivism and Paterian aestheticism, once we shift our globalizing gaze from the West to East Asia, the Foucaultian self appears perhaps less dangerous (and, one is forced to conclude, somewhat less novel). This is not to absolve Foucault, or to claim that he had in mind any such “Zen” perspective (though he did study Buddhist mysticism while lecturing in Japan in 1978), but merely to recognize the real possibility of a Western prejudice in unreflective condemnation of a non-essentialist aesthetic self-formulation, and to enliven the possibility of a “selfless selfhood.”

Conclusions

I created thee a being neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal only, that thou mightest be free to shape and to overcome thyself.

– God speaking to Man (in Pico della Mirandola)

The problem restated: Once meaning becomes formalized in the Structural Allegory—conceptualized, loosed within structures and systems—the “I” loses centrality (and real meaning) and is set adrift in an already godless world of forms, where nothing is real, nothing sacred, and, perhaps, as Ivan Karamazov would have it, “everything is permitted.” Lois McNay cites this as the fundamental dilemma in recent social science: “Where does the poststructuralist deconstruction of unified subjectivity into fragmented subject positions lead in terms of an understanding of individuals as active agents capable of inventing and transforming their social environment?” (McNay 1).

In this paper I have shown that Michel Foucault, in his last writings on the self, turned away from a postmodern aesthetic in which the “end of Man” heralds the “birth of literature”—the development of a transgressive counter-discourse within the gaps produced by power and meaning. Recognizing the limitations of such a narrow and Romantic language-based theory of resistance, Foucault turned toward a concept of “aesthetics of existence,” providing through his study of Greco-Roman and Christian hermeneutics and “technologies” of self the possibility for a new mode of subjectivity and a new asceticism—a middle path between Stoic self-abnegation and Promethean self-deification, and one that does not deny action but endorses such as part and parcel of an ethics of self-creation. The “gap,” which in *The Order of Things* allows for very little escape, is here widened to allow for the prospect of human agency and autonomy. The “self” of the late Foucault is best conceived as a pragmatic simulacrum—a useful chimera or “skillful means” that in several important ways reflects traditional Zen Buddhist notions of selfless selfhood.

*Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves – goes itself; myself it speaks and spells;
Crying: What I do is me...*

– Gerard Manley Hopkins

*It is through this kind of creativity that our power is revealed,
and it is in our capacity to use it well that our destiny lies.*

– Michel Foucault

Notes

1. In this paper I will sometimes employ the gender specific “man” (always in scare quotes) because this is the word used by Foucault and the majority of the other (mostly) men whose ideas I am discussing, and it would be perhaps giving them too much credit for feminist sensibility to assume that they were thinking about women when they used the term. The implications of such usage must be left to the reader.

2. Structuralism (and, more generally, semiotics), which it emerged out of the work of Vico, Marx, Freud, and especially Ferdinand de Saussure, represents a veritable revolution in philosophical, linguistic, and sociological perspective. Claude

Lévi-Strauss, under the influence of the sociologist Durkheim and the linguist Saussure, provided in his works a formulation of a structuralist anthropology and social theory. The Structural Allegory has since claimed many adherents and has been disavowed by just as many, yet in the past forty years it has remained as a powerful and influential vision of human existence, spreading across a whole spectrum of disciplines and reworked by thinkers as diverse as Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, and Jacques Derrida.

3. Lévi-Strauss: “Particular actions of individuals are never symbolic in themselves; they are the elements out of which is constituted a symbolic system, which must be collective” (Culler 4).

4. Whitman: “Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself... perhaps, I contain multitudes.” Oscar Wilde: “We are never more true to ourselves than when we are inconsistent.” Foucault: “Do not ask who I am.”

5. Ambrose Bierce, in his *Devil’s Dictionary*, defines “self-evident” as “Evident to one’s self and to nobody else”—surely a cynical condemnation of the use of the term, but one to which Foucault would no doubt agree.

6. One of the main features in this Stoic process became the taking of notes to be later reread and reflected upon to discover the “truths” one needed. (Foucault “Technologies” 27)

7. This shifts the objective away from a preparation for adult civic life towards a preparation for a complete achievement of life, whence fulfillment comes at the moment just prior to death, inverting the Greek youth ideal into an ethic of old age as completion. See Foucault “Technologies” 13.

8. Stoicism is another manner of self-examination, one in which dialogue is replaced by a pedagogical game in which the disciple listens silently to the words of the master, invoking a certain “culture of silence” (Foucault “Technologies” 32). Plato’s Socratic culture of dialogue is superseded by this new (Zen-like) cultivation of the Art of Listening, in which silence precedes activity and speech.

9. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault contrasts the two prominent “procedures” of sexuality: *ars erotica*, associated with the Eastern world (and Rome), and *scientia sexualis*, that distinctively Western phenomenon which has its roots in Christian confessionalism. The science of sex is characterized by an “exhaustive articulation of desires,” which produces knowledge that claims to hold the key to mental and physical health as well as to social well-being, the end of this analytic knowledge being either Utility, Morality, or Truth. (Rabinow and Dreyfus 180)

10. Rabinow and Dreyfus 107. Ironically, Foucault also cites Kant with respect to the roots of his own critical method, claiming that by asking, for the first time in philosophy, the question “What are we today?” Kant began a tradition of critical analysis picked up by Foucault as an alternative to traditional philosophical queries—one that can focus on the forms of power that have made us subjects in two senses (to others and to our own identity). See Foucault “Subject and Power” 212.

11. The poetry of the Baudelaire relies heavily upon the tension produced by the oscillation between *Idéal*, a heightened state of perception and fertile creative energy, and *Spleen*, a condition of nervous tension and self-disgust conjoined with a realization of the underlying meaninglessness of human existence. “Harmonie du soir,” in particular, dramatizes the ritualistic creation of something out of nothing, the ultimate allegory for the Baudelairean dandy.

12. *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature* is a central theme (and a title) of the work of Ernst Bloch, who sought an understanding of aesthetics related to basic ontological and political questions underlying humankind's quest for utopia. Aesthetic questions must be reformulated to preserve the cultural heritage that Bloch considers necessary for humankind's survival.

13. Of course, the difficulties involved when one attempts to "philosophize" Zen are legion. As the orthodox line (itself, of course, as much a piece of rhetoric as any other), Zen is an "experience," and is in some sense anti-philosophical, as it defies the use of "words and letters," which are "dualistic" and thus limiting. See Wright for an illuminating reflection and critique of Zen philosophy and its relation to language.

14. Suzuki 376. It may be noticed that I am employing sources for my remarks on Zen that have recently come under severe criticism—both in the West and Japan—for providing stilted impressions of Zen. While it is certainly true that the writings of Christmas Humphries evoke a Romantic interpretation heavily infected with nontraditional and Western assumptions, and that D. T. Suzuki was, as the expression goes, involved in "selling" Buddhism to the West in a very particular fashion, it is also true that there are precedents within the indigenous Chan/Zen traditions that support the specific ideas and claims I am citing herein.

15. See Odin for an illuminating comparative study of the "social self" in Japanese and Western (particular American) traditions.

16. It is always important to recognize that these are "theories" in the sense of being ideals that may or may not reflect upon the way Zen followers actually live their lives, whether in the past or present. My present line of research involves the criticism from within the tradition of ethical lapses amongst Zen leaders.

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